



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of American Culture and Literature

**WAR AND MIGRATION IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
VIETNAMESE AMERICAN NOVELS**

Fatma EREN

Ph.D. Dissertation

Ankara, 2025

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ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

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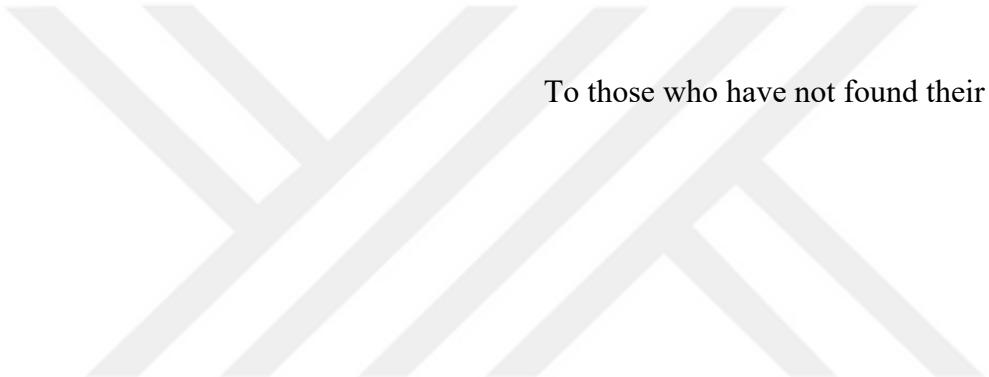
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ETİK BEYAN

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Fatma EREN



To those who have not found their home, yet

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ABSTRACT

EREN, Fatma. *War And Migration in Twenty-First Century Vietnamese American Novels*,
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This dissertation analyzes four contemporary Vietnamese American novels written by the younger generation Vietnamese, who either experienced the Vietnam War as a child or is a descendant of a Vietnamese refugee family. *Short Girls* (2009) by Bich Minh Nguyen, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012) by Aimee Phan, *The Lotus and The Storm* (2014) by Lan Cao, and *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021) by Eric Nguyen are written during the first quarter of the twenty-first century that feature different aspects of the Vietnamese diaspora. During the Vietnam Civil War, the Vietnamese were represented as victims to be liberated by the US government. After its failure in Vietnam, the US included the Vietnamese in American society through racial and economic subordination. This study uses national abjection theory and critical refugee studies to put the Vietnamese refugee experience at the center in each chapter and to offer an alternative reading of the Vietnamese diaspora, by discussing the refugee camp experience, Vietnamese masculinity, gang formation, ethnic enclaves, single motherhood, generational conflict, and Vietnamese American identity. The previous generation, the survivors of the war, had to act in accordance with the politically constructed racist subject positions to survive and integrate. Their children, raised with economic hardships, conflicting cultural values, and lingering traumas, experience a limbo state that affected their sense of identity and belonging. These writers explore the realities behind the so-called “good war” narratives and voice their abjection to challenge their victim position. The search for their past provides a step to acknowledge and celebrate their refugee status. Although these narratives do not offer ultimate reconciliation and healing, the articulation of this experience opens up space for them. These works pave the way for the construction of more integrated societies in which diverse identities are respectfully recognized.

Keywords

Vietnam War, Vietnamese American Novel, Critical Refugee Studies, National Abjection Theory, Vietnamese American Identity

ÖZET

EREN, Fatma. *Yirmi Birinci Yüzyıl Vietnamlı Amerikalı Romanlarında Savaş ve Göç*, Doktora Tezi, Ankara, 2025.

Bu tez, Vietnam Savaşı'nı çocukken deneyimlemiş veya Vietnamlı bir mülteci aileden gelen genç nesil Vietnamlılar tarafından yazılmış dört çağdaş Vietnamlı-Amerikalı romanı analiz eder. Bich Minh Nguyen'in *Short Girls* (2009), Aimee Phan'ın *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012), Lan Cao'nun *The Lotus and The Storm* (2014) ve Eric Nguyen'in *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021) Vietnam diasporasının farklı yönlerini konu alır. Vietnamlılar, Vietnam İç Savaşı'nda ABD hükümeti tarafından kurtarılması gereken kurbanlar olarak yansıtılmıştı. Vietnam'daki başarısızlığının ardından Amerika ulusal imajını sağlamlaştırmak için, Vietnamlıları Amerikan toplumuna ırksal ekonomik bağlılık üzerinden dahil etti. Vietnam mülteci deneyimini merkeze alan bu tez, her bölümde mülteci kampları, Vietnam erkekliği, çete oluşumu, etnik yerleşimler, bekar annelik, kuşak çatışması ve Vietnamlı Amerikalı kimliği gibi konuları tartışır. Bu bağlamda, ulusal abjeksiyon teorisi ve kritik mülteci çalışmalarından yararlanarak Vietnam diasporası adına yazılan anlatılara alternatif sunar. Savaştan sağ kurtulan önceki nesil, hayatta kalmak ve uyum sağlamak için politik olarak yapılandırılmış ırkçı özne konumlarına uygun hareket etmek zorundaydı. Ekonomik zorluklar, çatışan kültürel değerler ve devam eden travmalarla büyüyen çocukları, Vietnam kimliği ve Amerika'daki konumlarını etkileyen bir belirsizlik durumu ile yaşamaktadır. Romanları aracılığıyla bu yazarlar sözde “iyi savaş” anlatılarının ardındaki gerçeklikleri araştırarak tarihten gizlenmiş gerçekleri ortaya koymaktadırlar. Geçmişlerini araştırmak mülteci statülerini kabul etmek ve kutlamak için değerli bir adım sağlamaktadır. Bu anlatılar uzlaşma ve iyileşme gibi nihai hedefler sunmasa da Vietnamlı Amerikalı deneyiminin bu kısmının dile getirilmesi onlara alan açar. Bu yazarların anlatıları tüm kimliklerin saygıyla tanındığı, daha bütünlüklü toplumların inşasına zemin hazırlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Vietnam Savaşı, Vietnamlı Amerikalı Romanı, Kritik Mülteci Çalışmaları, Ulusal Abjeksiyon Teorisi, Vietnamlı Amerikalı Kimliği

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INTRODUCTION

Today, US-Vietnam relations are mostly known through the Vietnam War, which has taken a heavy toll on both Vietnamese and American psychological and mental health for years. The US involvement in the Vietnamese Civil War leads many Vietnamese critics to refer to it as the American War due to their role in the large-scale destruction of Vietnam. Although American intervention in Vietnam sparked nationwide anti-war marches and protests organized by thousands of Americans after the sudden retreat of American forces, the Vietnamese were met by mistreatment and prejudice by the larger American public. The term Vietnamese American is politically loaded, for it connotes the refugee crisis in America that started in the mid-1970s, towards the end of the Vietnam War.

While the Vietnamese migration to America is often cited as a war-related phenomenon, it is worth noting that it refers to a diverse experience including various migration patterns, occurring at different times, through numerous means, and for various reasons. For instance, some Vietnamese migrants came to America as scholars, professionals, and war brides before the War (Pham 138). However, their numbers reached a peak after the war ended in 1975, rendering the Vietnamese “the fifth largest Asian American group” and the largest diasporic community in the United States (Pelaud 8). The Vietnamese population today mostly consists of war refugees, having come to the US as part of the so-called humanitarian action following the Vietnam War. As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud points out, the migration of the Vietnamese in 1975 “represents the largest population movement to America since the immigration of Jews during and after World War II” (8). Thus, the Vietnamese, most affected by the war and its consequences, constitute the largest group of refugees from South Asia. It was the Vietnam War that marks their displacement experience and distinguishes them from other Asian groups.

The previous generation, the survivors of the war, had to act in accordance with the politically-constructed racist subject positions in order to survive and integrate. Their children, raised with economic hardships, conflicting social values, and lingering

traumas, experience a limbo status that affect their sense of Vietnamese identity and place in America. This dissertation offers an analysis of four contemporary Vietnamese American novels written by the younger generation Vietnamese that has either experienced the Vietnam War as a child or is a descendant of a Vietnamese refugee family. *Short Girls* (2009) by Bich Minh Nguyen, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012) by Aimee Phan, *The Lotus and The Storm* (2014) by Lan Cao, and *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021) by Eric Nguyen are written in the first quarter of the twenty-first century and they feature different aspects of the Vietnamese diaspora. Vietnam War memory and family history are their main motivations to explore the past and the present and to mediate between future possibilities of living. Although negotiation with the past does not always promise reconciliation, healing, or self-actualization, it contributes to an examination of the main reasons for their forced displacement and realization of their Vietnamese identity. Thus, the alternative voice of the younger generation paves the way for discussing the “obscured role” of the US, biases and violence in the reception of their parents, and perpetuating stereotypes that still impact their lives considerably.

Before moving on to an examination of the Vietnamese refugee experience through a literary analytical lens, it is important to offer historical and political processes of Vietnamese displacement. When America announced its withdrawal in 1973, Vietnam was a war-damaged country, shaken by civil strife, international intervention, and crimes against humanity. Fear of death, war fatigue, and political and economic uncertainty under the North Vietnamese government pushed many Vietnamese people to flee to different destinations, including the US, hoping to find better living conditions. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, a legal document on the status of refugees, defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 3). The Vietnamese refugee experience in the US is imbued with material, political, and emotional precarity due to displacement and resettlement processes.

Despite public opposition, the US government showed initiative in admitting the refugees due to their critical role in US's self-promotion as a benevolent power after its failure against the communist regime. Yên Lê Espiritu writes that Vietnamese immigrants as refugees were welcomed not only to enable "the US construction of itself as multiculturalist, pluralist and open-minded," (346) but also "to remake the Vietnam War into a just and successful war" ("The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose'" 329). In "Toward a Critical Refugee Study," Espiritu analyzes the US's "self-appointed" role "as rescuers" (412) and the portrayal of the Vietnamese as "better off in America" (414). In doing so, Espiritu notes, the US denied its role in accelerating military intervention in the Vietnam War and triggering the exodus after the war (412). After almost four decades of intervention in Vietnam's internal matters, the US left Vietnam in 1973 without taking any responsibility. As claimed by George C. Herring, further US presence would result in "the physical annihilation of North Vietnam," and any possible Soviet and Chinese intervention would lead to more severe results without a permanent solution to the Vietnam conflict (Herring 114).

The lack of "a 'liberated' Vietnam and the people" was compensated by "the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees" (Espiritu, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose'" 329). In other words, the Vietnamese refugee reception, despite public opposition, served as an act of purging the national conscience and as a proof of humanitarian generosity. As Espiritu further explains, "[t]he propaganda value of accepting refugees fleeing communism—deemed the living symbols of communism's failure—was central to US foreign policy goals, providing the nation with an alleged advantage over the Soviet Union" (*Body Counts* 8-9). Therefore, the processes preceding and succeeding the Vietnamese refugee flight must be considered as a whole before coming to the conclusion that Vietnamese people are "docile subjects who enthusiastically and uncritically embrace and live the 'American Dream'" (Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee" 413). When its national interests in Vietnam and its participation in the Southeast Asian power struggle are acknowledged, it becomes clear that the US shares a tremendous responsibility for Vietnamese displacement. On the destruction the war created, the historian Sucheng Chan writes that the extensive use of munitions "displaced some twelve million people in South Vietnam—about half the total population of the country at the time—from their homes"

(55). Such destruction inevitably affected the Vietnamese and forced them to flee the country.

The country was unified under “the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” in 1976 after the North took over South Vietnam in 1975. The immediate exodus process points to a huge humanitarian crisis and the US consternation at dealing with the consequences of the war. The US officials had no clue about the number of people on the move (Chan 62). In the same year, a randomly-picked 130,000 Vietnamese and Cambodians, consisting of high-ranking government and military Vietnamese who worked for or had a relationship with the US military flew out of the country to the US naval bases in the Philippines and Guam (62).¹ They were the members of “educated” and “wealthier” classes, pro-capitalist southerners who came to America from 1975 to 1978, fearing retaliation for their connections to the previous government and their American collaborators (Pelaud 9).²

Broadly speaking, the Vietnamese migrated to America roughly in five distinct waves, each with their differing immigrant profile (Tran Nguyen 5).³ The first wave consists of 130,000 exiles who were usually high-skilled people, working for the South Vietnamese government. As Takaki notes, “[u]nlike the other Asian groups already in America, the 1975 wave of Vietnamese migrants [the first wave] did not choose to come here. In fact, they had no decision to make, for they were driven out by the powerful events surrounding them” (449). These Vietnamese were taken to the transit camps (detention centers) on American military bases in the Philippines, Wake Island and Guam before they were processed into mainland bases at Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania while waiting to be sponsored by groups and individuals in the US (Tran Nguyen 5).

¹ It is 140,000 according to Espiritu.

² As Chan notes, although the US sought to “‘internationalize’ the resettlement,” the Western countries, viewing “the exodus as an American problem” rather than a world problem, accepted only tenth of the total refugee population (65). Moreover, in an effort to prevent a larger mass of immigration, the US officials obscured the details of the evacuation (65).

³ The number of Vietnamese immigration waves are treated differently by scholars. While some writers divide it into three major waves, the latest literature examines it in five waves as Phuong Tran Nguyen does. The dates also vary in different sources. In this study, they are given based on Tran Nguyen’s *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* (2017).

In 1978, another wave came, together with those who had arrived in relatively small numbers in the previous two years.⁴ Many of them drowned at sea while many women were raped (Pelaud 11). They were called “boat people” who escaped Vietnam to find refuge in nearby island countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. The second wave signifies one of the many tragedies of Vietnamese displacement since the countries turned away the boats while they were also attacked by pirates. The confiscation of private lands and switching economic enterprises to the Republic during the socialist reconstruction period alarmed people and accelerated escapes from the sanctions of the new government (Chan 67). The unpredictable, fast-paced refugee arrivals created a complete disorder for the first asylum countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong, which refused to harbor the refugee boats any longer (Chan 78). It provoked an indignation in those countries which were obligated to accept all the refugees that appeared on their shores while the Western countries had the privilege to choose whom they would offer resettlement (Chan 82).

Starting in the 1980s, third wave refugees came to the US under the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). There were three categories of people allowed to enter the US through ODP: “close family members of Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese from Vietnam already in the United States, former employees of U.S. government agencies, and other individuals ‘closely identified’ with the U.S. presence in Vietnam before 1975” (qtd. in Chan 81). The Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987 marks the fourth wave, including the mixed-race Vietnamese children and family members. The final wave came in 1990, including the entry of a large number of political prisoners and their families into America through the Humanitarian Operation Program (Tran Nguyen 6). When President Clinton lifted the trade embargo on Vietnam in 1994 through the Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement, a normalization period started between the two countries. The normalization period marked the reestablishment of diplomatic and economic relations. The Vietnamese, coming to the US after the agreement have attained immigrant status (Dien Nguyen 37).

⁴ The slow systematic process of social and economic transformation in reunifying the country is a reason for decreasing refugee flow in late 1975 and early 1978 (Chan 66).

There was great diversity among these refugee groups, in terms of their socioeconomic profiles, political beliefs, education, skills, ethnicities, and ways/processes of entry into the US. Viet Thanh Nguyen characterizes the Vietnamese post-war migration as “one of the most massive, long-lasting, and diverse migrations in the modern world” (“More than Just Refugees” 87). Seen as “an aberration of categories in the national order of things,” Vietnamese refugees were limited to restricted living options (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 11). Moreover, the negative connotations attached to the word “refugee” and stereotyping the Vietnamese as “the new model minority” or “the good refugee” constitute a way of justifying the poor conditions they were forced to live in, such as “unstable, minimum-wage employment, welfare dependency, and participation in the informal economy after their arrival” (qtd. in Espiritu, *Body Counts* 7). Therefore, their experiences in the United States cannot be generalized to fit the patterns of other immigrant groups, or predetermined patterns.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the end of the French Indochina War (1946-1954), Vietnam was divided into two nations at the 17th parallel under the 1954 Geneva Accords: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Communist North) and the State of Vietnam (non-Communist South). Vietnam had been under the rule of France for nearly seventy years. Viet Minh forces had led the revolt against French colonialism under the communist leader Ho Chi Minh in 1945. America interpreted the conflict from a different perspective. As George Herring notes, “the United States perceived the war in Vietnam largely in terms of its conflict with the Soviet Union,” as one of the proxy wars of the Cold War (106). Thus, the politics of Vietnam was largely shaped by the US fear of communism, its spread through the domino theory, and its containment through soft and hard power means. This prompted the US intervention in the Vietnam civil conflict, first through “advisors” (the CIA) during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, and then military intervention during the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

America’s military involvement in the Second Indochina War, better known as the Vietnam War, started in 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and lasted until it

withdrew in 1973. The military involvement in Vietnam was gradual, happening in a series of events spanning almost three decades. Starting from the First Indochina War (1946-1954) between France and the newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, the United States was involved in Vietnam's ongoing conflicts, providing a considerable amount for France's military spending (Chan 44). Sucheng Chan explains that America's benevolent funding of France was "not because they (the United States) supported French colonialism per se, but because they themselves were fighting an anti-Communist Cold War" (44).

Likewise, in her discussion of the Vietnam War, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud adds another dimension to American involvement in Southeast Asia, underlining its competitive spirit against European powers, namely Britain and France, which were in a relentless struggle to establish colonies in Asia (141). After WWII, the accelerating rivalry among superpowers also led the US to protect its geopolitical interests in Asia, which was exacerbated by Cold War tensions. Considering its critical dependence on raw materials such as crude rubber and tin from Southeast Asia, the US targeted Vietnam not only for its "greater instability in the region," but also for its "economic interests" (141). Nevertheless, fearing another failure such as the Korean War, the US refused to assist the French during the critical Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the loss of which led to the collapse of French colonial power in Vietnam and its withdrawal from the country. Pelaud states that following the failure of the French military in the 1954 First Indochina War, US officials feared "[the] economic stagnation and political instability in Viet Nam caused by the departure of the French could provoke a communist takeover in Viet Nam that would spread across Asia" (141).

In its support for an independent South Vietnam after the Geneva Conference, the US was alarmed by communist uprisings and tried to manage the crisis through "advisors" and its involvement in the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). However, this could not prevent the 1963 South Vietnamese coup, which was backed by America against the South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem, who disagreed with the US on internal matters. After the coup, the number of American military advisors increased dramatically in Vietnam, and the country experienced great political unrest as a result of

successive changes in the government (Chan 48). When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, three weeks after the coup, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson replaced Kennedy. This marked a shift in the US government's handling of the war in Vietnam. According to Sucheng Chan, although Kennedy was unwilling to deploy military force in Vietnam, Johnson was more inclined to act with military officers and combat advisors who urged him to "take drastic action" by initiating physical combat in North Vietnam (49). Although hesitant, President Johnson approved air and sea surveillance and attacks on North Vietnam's communication and transportation systems instead of launching immediate air raids.

It was the Gulf of Tonkin Incident on August 2, 1964 that ignited the American war in Vietnam. Using alleged attacks on US Navy ships, the U.S.S. Maddox and U.S.S. Turner Joy that were surveilling the North Vietnamese coast in the Gulf of Tonkin, President Johnson authorized retaliatory strikes on North Vietnamese forces. As Chan writes, "[t]o this day, there is still no agreement over whether there was an actual attack against American ships that night" (49). Nevertheless, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident provided the Johnson administration with "a golden opportunity it thoroughly exploited" (Seagren and Henderson 78). The US government passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that enabled the United States military to become directly involved in the conflict between North and South Vietnam.

In an effort to prevent a likely insurrection in South Vietnam sponsored by the North, the US started several airstrikes in late 1964 against North Vietnam. Through Operation Barrel Roll, Operation Flaming Dart, and Operation Rolling Thunder, the US destroyed Vietnam's roads, bridges, power plants, supply depots and military bases (Chan 50). US pilots also dropped deadly chemicals such as napalm, Agent Orange, and other herbicides to destroy the forests in order to acquire a better picture of the country's terrain during the attacks. As a result, life in Vietnam became "unbearable . . . in such a toxic devastated environment" (Lieu 12). The departure of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) (South Vietnamese) soldiers prompted President Johnson to send the first American ground combat forces to South Vietnam to compensate for the soldiers and maintain control of the territory (Chan 51).

With the help of the Viet Kong, the supporters of the communist National Liberation Front in South Vietnam, North Vietnamese Army invaded South Vietnamese cities on January 30, 1968, known as the Vietnamese New Year or Tet holiday. The event came to be called the Tet Offensive, which was supposed to be a ceasefire for the South Vietnamese army and officers to leave their bases and offices to celebrate the day with their families. However, North Vietnamese forces and their supporters used the opportunity to plan a sneak attack that caught the opposition off-guard and changed the whole course of the war. A sixty-year-old Vietnamese immigrant recounts the day stating, “On the first day of the Lunar New Year, we usually celebrate with firecrackers and family get-togethers. But on that day, we celebrated with fire and death” (Aguilar-San Juan xii). After weeks of planning, North Vietnamese troops were deployed in the southern cities that targeted “thirty-six out of forty-four provincial capitals, sixty-six county seats, and many military bases” (Chan 52). It took nearly four weeks for Southern forces to turn the tide against Northern soldiers. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, including military personnel and government figures, and it became the turning point of the war. It was at this point that the US began discussing Vietnamization, or the withdrawal of the American military from the country, and its return to the Vietnamese people (Chan 52). It was “[a]n immense psychological defeat for the United States” (Chan 53) and “a psychological victory for the Communist forces” (Walton 45). The disaster also cost President Johnson his political career. Soon after, he gave up the idea of running for a second term, and it forced him to put an end to the bombing of North Vietnam (53).

For Johnson’s successor Richard Nixon, finding a solution to the Vietnam conflict was a “top priority” in the face of protest and dissent when he took office in 1969 (Mergel 33). He started the gradual drawdown of American troops—that took four years—while American support of the South Vietnamese army continued through advisors, equipment, and services (Chan 53). However, behind closed doors, they were planning military operations in Cambodia and Laos to annihilate communist army sanctuaries and expel them from South Vietnam. Despite the optimistic mood of the President, most attacks resulted in failure and defeat. The military forces continued to commit war crimes, killing innocent people in cities and villages. My Lai massacre was one of such horrific incidents

in 1968 in which American troops murdered over 400 Vietnamese civilians, although there were no armed enemy forces.

Furthermore, the tragedy in Vietnam sparked a nationwide antiwar movement in America and drove people to massive anti-war demonstrations. The American public was divided into two groups: “[T]he so-called hawks” who demanded intensification of warfare in Vietnam and “[t]he doves” who asked for peace (Roark 1082). Thousands, including students, protested the American involvement through marches, speeches, rallies and iconic incidents, such as draft card burning, throughout the 1960s. In 1970, the student protests turned into violent confrontations between the students and the police on university campuses, including Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State College in Mississippi. Four white and two black students were killed in these two incidents. The leak of Pentagon Papers in 1971, exposing the extent of US involvement and untold facts about Vietnam, created a “heightened disillusionment” in American society that shook the government’s credibility (Roark 1092). Opposition to the war came from all sides including many celebrities from different fields, such as the boxing champion Muhammed Ali, prominent feminist figure Jane Fonda and mothers from Women Strike for Peace (WSP). As Chan underlines, the status of South Vietnam, whether it would be unified under the communist rule of the North or remain as an independent non-communist state, created a dilemma, prolonged settling the conflict, and caused a delay in America’s withdrawal from Vietnam (54).

This set the stage for the United States, South Vietnam, the Viet Kong, and North Vietnam to sign the Paris Peace Agreement in 1973. The agreement followed by the swift evacuation of the US military bases, “leav[ing] South Vietnam to its own fate” (Chan 55). As for the remnants and brutality of the war, YẾN LÊ Espiritu writes that Vietnam witnessed

one of the most brutal and destructive wars between western imperial powers and the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. U.S. military policies—search and destroy missions in the South, carpet bombing raids in the North, free-fire zones, and chemical defoliation—cost Vietnam at least three million lives, the maiming of countless bodies, the poisoning of its water, land, and air, the razing of its countryside, and the devastation of most of its infrastructure. Indeed, more explosives were dropped on Vietnam, a country

two-thirds the size of California, than in all of World War II. (“Thirty Years AfterWARD” xiii)

The war resulted in the death of approximately 4 million Vietnamese civilians, 1.5 million Vietnam military personnel, and 58,200 American soldiers (Jeffries 83). Reunification did not help the country overcome the devastation. The physical destruction of the Vietnamese landscape was brutal; most inhabitable areas were ruined by Agent Orange, with unexploded bombs scattered all over the countryside, leaving peasants under duress. The economic mess cultivated a soaring inflation, rising to 900% (Yun 73). Although the US agreed to give \$3.5 billion for the reconstruction of the infrastructure at the Paris Peace Talks, “[i]t never paid a cent” and even asked the communist government to refund the loans given to the old Saigon regime (Davies). While Vietnam was in desperate need to recuperate its economy and rebuild the nation through trade and aid, the American government “did its best to make sure it got neither” through trade embargoes (Davies). The government’s only compensation payment was \$2 billion, merely paid to its veterans for the adverse effects of Agent Orange exposure, which included everything from respiratory illness to genetic mutations that affected their offspring (Davies).

America’s involvement in Vietnam did not end with its withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1975. Trade embargoes on Vietnam lasted for twenty years until President Bill Clinton lifted them in 1994, by announcing the death of the Vietnam Syndrome as a basis for further military interventions in the Middle East. Herring defines the term as “an unwillingness to commit U.S. troops to an unwinnable conflict” (“The Vietnam Syndrome” 409). The sanctions devastated Vietnam’s already shattered economy, leading the country to rank among the poorest nations in the world, resulting in the displacement of the majority of its people. Aside from the casualties, there were thousands of Vietnamese people who were left without homes and hope for the future. After all, the war the American government insistently pursued “as an integral part of their broader struggle with communism” turned out to be a major failure (Herring, “America and Vietnam” 106).

A SURVEY OF VIETNAMESE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Broadly speaking, Vietnamese American literature, starting from the 1960s, has mainly been written to educate the American public about events in Vietnam and later to tackle the historical “erasure” by the American government (Janette, “Vietnamese American” 1). Just like the differences in class, profile, and ethnicity among the waves of Vietnamese immigration, their works feature diverse topics related to their displacement and resettlement experiences. As earlier examples, Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tran Van Dinh are two authors from the 1960s who published works in English about the political corruption in South Vietnam—the US ally during their temporary stay in America. Correspondingly, the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the subsequent refugee waves marked a gradual and simultaneous subject change in the works by the Vietnamese who wrote with the motivation either to transfer the experience of war in Vietnam or encourage “healing and reconciliation” (“Vietnamese American” 8). In this regard, their works feature alternative perspectives against the anti-refugee sentiment of the time and are written with the hope of providing the American public with “the fuller story” to dissociate their people from racial classifications such as “enemy ‘gook’” (Janette, “Vietnamese American” 9).

Isabel Thuy Pelaud (23) and Michele Janette suggest that in the earlier works, the language in which the work is produced in affects the content (8). While those writing in Vietnamese find a sphere to express their sadness and feelings of exile, the writers who are competent in the English language produce works in which “the dissociation from communist Viet Nam” is critical (Pelaud 23). For instance, poets such as Cao Tan, Nguyen Ba Trac, and Nguyen Mong Giac, writing in Vietnamese, are preoccupied with “the state of exile and the great sadness of losing their country” (Pelaud 23).⁵ Works such as *Prison Years in North Vietnam* by Tran Huynh Chau, *The Bloody Shackles* by Pham Quoc Bao, *At the Bottom of Hell* by Ta Ty talk about sadness and longing for a lost nation (24).

⁵ There were exceptions to this nostalgic narrative mode even in Vietnamese since the human side of the war such as suffering, trauma, and hardships of resettlement were critical yet often overlooked. The novelist Mai Thao, as a case in point, who came to the US in the next wave of immigration, explicitly narrates the persecution under the communist rule and daunting challenges they face while fleeing the war (Pelaud 23).

Our Endless War (1978) by Trần Văn Đôn, *At Home in America* (1979) by Nguyen Van Vu, and *The Final Collapse* (1985) by Cao Van Vien were among the works of the time informing American people about what they had gone through. They are concerned with reversing racist categorizations due to their association with the communist government and their reception as a liability to the general American public. To this end, the literature of the time reflected “the strong ideology of anti-communism,” adopted by the first generation of refugees as a social response (Reed-Danahay 606).

Yet, it was not until the mid-1980s that Vietnamese American literature in English uncoincidentally got the attention of large publishing houses with the release of novels from the North Vietnamese perspective (Pelaud 26). American readers tended to reject works that might trigger the Vietnam Syndrome, and it might be stated that the works that offered justifications for the war were likely to find more favor (25). *A Vietcong Memoir* (1985) by Truong Nhu Tang and *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) by Le Ly Hayslip are two main examples from this era that appealed to the American public for their presentation of the disillusionment with the communist government (26).

Mostly produced as memoirs, the narratives of Vietnamese diaspora between 1985 and the 1990s showed how “national, global, and personal issues are inextricable from one another” (Janette, “Vietnamese American” 9). In this vein, Nguyễn Thị Thu-Lâm’s *Fallen Leaves* (1984), Nguyen Thi Tuyet-Mai’s *The Rubber Tree* (1994), and Yung Krall’s *A Thousand Tears Falling* (1995) display how political conflicts negatively impacted their family lives (Janette 9). In addition, the gender of the author also makes a difference with regards to their chosen themes. While male authors, mostly consisting of ex-military personnel, envision different scenarios related to the war, in women’s narratives such as those by Tran Dieu Hang’s, the emotional and socioeconomic challenges of migration emerge (Pelaud 25). As Pelaud writes, resettlement caused distress and tension for the women in general, as depicted in their narratives and, particularly, “[f]or women who came from the elite class, work was not always considered a source of empowerment, as certain feminists have assumed, but rather as a crude reminder of loss of status and diminished lifestyle” (25). Therefore, although relocation appeared to be an

accomplishment in terms of survival, the struggle continued for the Vietnamese. They experienced various forms of material and emotional challenges, starting from the transition process involving major changes in living conditions and family structures, among others.

It was the impact of the ending of the embargo on Vietnam in 1994 that the Vietnamese American literary production started to take off in the American market (Pelaud 27). *South Wind Changing* (1994) by Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh and *Where the Ashes Are: The Odyssey of a Vietnamese Family* (1994) by Nguyen Qui Duc are two major publications of the time that contributed to the establishment of the Vietnamese American memoir as a genre (Pelaud 27). More importantly, the oppressive living conditions after the war in Vietnam and the necessity of undertaking perilous journeys to survive are treated as the protagonists waver between feelings of unbelonging due to becoming a stranger in their own country and a foreigner in the resettlement country.⁶ Janette explains two major troubles at the time reflected in the literary works by pointing to “the prison labor camps, known as ‘reeducation camps,’ and the treatment of the mixed-race children of American fathers and Vietnamese mothers” (9). Kien Nguyen’s *The Unwanted* (2001) is an example characterizing this issue. Andrew Phan’s *Perfume Dreams* (2005) portrays another major concern shared by the Vietnamese refugees at the time: “the rejection of refugees” as a reaction to the concentration of refugee populations in certain countries, such as the US and France (Janette, “Vietnamese American” 9).

Michele Janette sums up the main issues in Vietnamese American literature as “the trauma of war, including sexual violence, and the difficulties of war’s aftermath, including both posttraumatic stress disorder and racism against the Vietnamese in the United States” (10). As flesh-and-blood representatives of real-life events, the characters and their varying perspectives in the narratives reflect not only the diversity of experiences among the Vietnamese diasporic population but also offer a representation

⁶ From Pelaud’s reading of the two main texts of the time, it is seen that each writer experienced and expressed the war and its aftermath in their own way. For instance, nostalgia for the homeland, a significant theme in Vietnamese American literature at the time, evoked “grief” for Huynh. Nevertheless, it was met by a sense of discernment due to the coexisting feelings of “pain and pleasure” for Duc (Pelaud 29).

of their collective and individual concerns in parallel with the current history of war experience.

It is important to indicate at this point that the political dynamics at play—regarding the Vietnamese migration to the US and their integration processes—shape the refugee discourse and its reflection in literature. The reception of the Vietnamese refugees through the discourse of victimhood and imbuing the term, refugee, with a crisis to be “dealt with” is a US policy that has caused a long-term negative effect that “continues to circumscribe American understanding of the Vietnamese” even today (Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee” 411). YẾN LÊ Espiritu draws attention to the depiction of the Vietnamese refugees as “objects of rescue” in need of American “care” in the post-war period (410).⁷ Moreover, bringing the focus to “economic adaptation” and “successful adjustment” of the Vietnamese refugees, the American government and scholars established “the good refugee” narrative as part of easing the American public tension to manage the refugee flow in the subsequent years (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 94).

The strategic showcasing of the Vietnamese attainment of the “American Dream” as a result of “Western benevolence and generosity” and their identification as “the new model minority” (51) obscures “the global historical conditions that produce massive displacements and movements of refugees to the United States and elsewhere” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 5). The American public imagination was shaped by the politics over Vietnamese “bodies and minds” and praise for their “successful” integration into the American society instead of the violent nature of the war and the social, economic and political turmoil threatened people’s lives during and after the war (“Toward a Critical Refugee” 410).

The treatment of the Vietnamese flight and resettlement as a “crisis” to be dealt with situates the Vietnamese refugees as the “passive recipients” of US “generosity” (“Toward a Critical Refugee” 412).⁸ Similarly, the study of the refugee camps as examples of this “crisis model” due to their immobility in the camp space also serves this purpose of

⁷ Although Espiritu’s notion echoes Edward Said’s famous theorization of Orientalism, Said originally uses it to refer to Southwest Asia, the Middle East and North Africa.

⁸ Here, Espiritu refers to “well-intentioned” studies as well (“Towards a Critical Refugee” 411).

depicting them unresisting receivers. More importantly, “[t]he official version of history—that communists create refugees while Americans save them—disguises the U.S. role in creating and sustaining the ongoing refugee crisis” (Tollefson 263). These misery and “rescue” representations perpetuate stereotypical assumptions about the Vietnamese experience and enforce “the US self-appointed role of rescuer” even today (412). Moreover, these political and social shifts find reflections in the mainstream literary works’ portrayal of the Vietnamese fitting racist stereotypes such as their being “childlike, small, immature, inferior to adult Americans” (Christopher 176).

As Espiritu clarifies, the criticisms of war and crisis-centered analysis of the Vietnamese experience today should not propose an erasure of the criticality of the war for the Vietnamese diaspora today. A digression from the war and the destruction created in Vietnam will first buttress the intentional overlooking of the calamity of the war in the post-1975 public discussion in the US and then enforce American presentation of itself “the self-appointed role as liberator” in the existing and future military interventions (*Body Counts* xiii). Rather, she promotes a reading of Vietnamese refugee experience through a broader engagement with the critical perspectives that will display the interwoven “colonization, war and displacement” (*Body Counts* 174). As Viet Thanh Nguyen states, “So much is told about Viet Nam, and so little is understood” (“Speak of the Dead” 13).

Consequently, the interest and increase in the discussion of Vietnamese displacement do not come to mean a change in the existing frames of reference in addressing the human cost of the Vietnam War or displacement. The misguided US view on Vietnam history and refugees stemming from the political misinformation shapes not only their reception, but also the content of literature by Vietnamese authors. As Michele Janette suggests, “silence and trauma” are the two main components that come to mind in studying American narratives about Vietnam (Janette, *My Viet* ix). Offering a particular perspective through “veterans’ necessary and fascinating accounts of the American experiences,” American works characterize “‘Nam’ as a surreal hellscape separate from ‘the World’” (*My Viet* ix). As a result, these representations not only neglect the distinctiveness of Vietnam as an autonomous cultural and political community, but also

activate hostility towards the Vietnamese, ignoring the fact that most of them were once “America’s South Vietnamese allies” rather than the “enemy” (*My Viet* ix).

In an effort to illustrate the human side of the war and to debunk misperceptions as a result of the refugee discourse by the American government and the media, Vietnamese American writers, starting from the 1990s, have engaged in “portray[ing] Viet Nam not only as a war, but a culture and people full of passion and flaws and conflict, and love” (qtd. in Pelaud 31). The reflections of the first generation on the political, historical and human aspects of Vietnamese American experience represent a kind of strategic complicity to the prevailing refugee discourses to be heard. In addition, some of the collaborations among the Vietnamese and American writers to overcome language barriers and to succeed in the publishing industry also display (in)voluntary participation of Vietnamese writers in producing some narratives—to the American government’s benefit (Pelaud 31). For instance, Linda Trinh Võ, a scholar of Vietnamese American studies, confesses how she felt obliged in her career journey to turn to “the typical ‘refugee’ model that focuses on [them] as simply victims of the Vietnam War and its aftermath” to be heard (“Vietnamese American Trajectories” ix). However, the overuse of the “refugee” model (by Americans) is the maintenance of the contemptuous correlation of Vietnam (and the Vietnamese) with the war.

Yet, the younger generation Vietnamese writers engage in history through their “own ways” by “extending themselves beyond the ‘survival and silence’ mode of their parents’ generation” (Võ xvi). As Janette notes, “[t]he 1.5-and second-generation Vietnamese American authors of the 21st century write not only out of a social need for their experiences to be heard, but also as literary professionals” (10). In other words, the current generation, including 1.25, 1.5, 1.75 and 2nd, differ from their predecessors in their approaches to war and migration experiences in a way that allows a reading of their parents’ experiences beyond common generalizations and stereotyped perceptions.⁹ The

⁹ In his article “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts,” Rubén G. Rumbaut makes a generational distinction regarding the refugee children based on their age of migration that influences the degree of exposure to the culture of the resettlement country. According to his classification, those who come to the US between the ages of 0-5 are 1.75 generation, those, arriving in their middle childhood between the ages of 6-12 are 1.5 generation, and lastly those arriving in the US between the ages of 13-17 years are considered 1.25 generation (1167).

younger generation expresses a more complex exploration of history and identity through their artistic creativity and have their own perspective on their being “objects of rescue.” Contrary to the early generation of Vietnamese refugee writers whose impetus was to retell, reckon, and sometimes to voice adaptation, the younger generation aimed at negotiating the past and socio-politically imposed positions that shape their lives and identities.

Notable Vietnamese American voices have emerged in recent years, such as Monique Truong, Viet Thanh Nguyen, (the winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for fiction), Andrew Lam, Dao Strom, Bich Minh Nguyen, Phong Nguyen, Ocean Vuong and Vi Khi Nao, whose works of fiction and nonfiction have enabled a reading of the Vietnamese experience from multiple angles.¹⁰ As a response to historical erasure, they (including those born in America) sometimes accentuate “the war itself and its aftermath” positioning literature as a way to deal with “history, politics and theory” (Phan 29-30). After all, for the Vietnamese “the war continue[s] as they have to resist race, gender, and economic disparities in America” (Eren 41). Furthermore, in contemporary Vietnamese American literature, identity comes forward as a theme intricately related with war history and its impact on refugee families and children (Pelaud 36). Dealing with the past is mostly problematic since the younger generation has a limited or no access to it due to their parents’ uneasy relationship with their history. Therefore, there is a bigger tendency to express “the search” for self-discovery instead of articulating “answers” (Võ xvi).¹¹ In an interview on “Eating, Reading, and Writing,” Andrew Lam states that “identities are not fixed in stone, and that after having gone through epic losses one also gains something as well, and new ways of looking at one’s self in place of history” (Brada-Williams 7).

¹⁰ Duong Van Mai Elliott’s *The Sacred Willow* (1999), Nancy Tran Cantrell’s *Seeds of Hope* (1999), Kien Nguyen’s *The Unwanted* (2001) and *The Tapestries* (2002), Jackie Bong-Wright’s *Autumn Cloud: From Vietnamese War Widow to American Activist* (2002), Anh Vu Sawyer’s *Song of Saigon* (2003), Trinh Do’s *Saigon to San Diego: Memoir of a Boy Who Escaped from Communist Vietnam* (2004), and Andrew Pham’s *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars* (2008) are examples of contemporary fiction that delve into Vietnamese history (Pelaud 37). On the other hand, in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997), le thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), Dao Strom’s *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* (2003), Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet* (2004), Samantha Le’s *Little Sister Left Behind* (2007), and Lac Su’s *I Love Yous Are for the White People* (2009) the issue of identity is mediated in the background of war, politics, and culture.

¹¹ The growth of Vietnamese literature ranging from various literary genres, such as pieces of traditional literature forms to visual art forms, also paves the way for transnational collaborations and their recognition through artistic expressions.

Likewise, in a joint conversation with Viet Thanh Nguyen and Andrew Lam, Aimee Phan notes how their diverse experiences as refugee children or children of refugees (those born in the US) inform the multiplicity of topics, including the refugee experience and questions of identity in their writings. In addition, they reflect how the growth in the field enables a shift in tackling the political agenda and delving into the complexities surrounding their lives in displacement and resettlement. Speaking on the change in his response to history in an interview with Aimee Phan, Andrew Lam recounts how the language of “sadness and anguish” in his narrative as a transmitter of “the travails and struggles” of his people gives way to competent, “self-directed” characters of “free will” over time (“New Voices” 29). Therefore, the increase in the voice of the diasporic Vietnamese literary and artistic community not only offers, in Lam’s words, “marvelous angles and views on the same story” but also novel literary and artistic crafts and styles regardless of the political agenda (qtd. in Phan, “New Voices” 29).¹² The ongoing evolution in artistic expressions of Vietnamese Americans, whether to reflect the versatility of experiences or different literary styles, corresponds to the breaking the stereotypical conceptions, particularly the victim stereotype entrenched in refugee experience in politics and literary production.

Speaking on “the great paradox” of the generational differences between the younger and older Vietnamese, Ocean Vuong emphasizes the critical role of the younger generation, taking initiative through artistic expression to speak for their parents. For the second generation, “fill[ing] yourself with agency to be an artist,” to use Vuong’s words, is not only to make their ways in a hostile society but also to make a statement for the decades-long disregard and disrespect: “[T]hey want to be seen, they want to make something” (“A Life Worthy of Our Breath” 33:03-33:14). In other words, the second generation’s demand for recognition challenges the former generation’s propensity to urge the younger Vietnamese to maintain the traditional ways of living and to use conventional mode(s) of address: “so many of us, immigrant children end up betraying our parents in order to subversively achieve our parents’ dreams” (“A Life Worthy of Our Breath” 33:15-33:27).

¹² Bich Minh Nguyen, Vi Khi Nao, Phong Nguyen, Dao Strom are some names who develop/ pioneer new forms of style in literature (in prose) while GB Tran, Thi Bui are representatives in the graphic novel, Vu Tran in the detective novel (Phan, “New Voices” 30).

For Viet Thanh Nguyen, the duty and role of the refugee writer(s) are critical in reflecting on dehumanization under the guise of humanitarian effort, as well as talking about the challenges the Vietnamese refugees confront during the pre- and post-displacement processes (*The Displaced* 17). As opposed to their representation as passive beneficiaries of help, the refugee writers illustrate that they

are not necessarily powerless or helpless, despite what mainstream humanitarian and other narratives may assert. Rather, the amount of power available to them is limited and variable. The works reveal that migrants [and refugees] make up diverse heterogeneous groups which should be seen as being resilient and resourceful, able to exercise various degrees of power in their diaspora spaces—provided that they also refuse to consider themselves as nothing more than victims. (Bosman 4)

Writing on the role of literature in the refugee context, Claire Gallien draws attention to the cases in which “refugee literature acts as a mode of resistance and resilience against the perpetuation of colonial control, predation, and destruction, in ‘postcolonial’ times” (723). As Judith Butler suggests, artistic creation in many forms (such as image or poetry) may not “free anyone from prison, or stop a bomb or, indeed, reverse the course of the war” (*Frames of War* 11). Yet it does “provide the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence” (11). In this sense, for the 1.25, 1.5, 1.75, and 2nd generation Vietnamese, proclaiming their unrecognized past and bringing forward their struggles can be interpreted as an effort to refuse those passive subject positions placed on them as a product of power structures. This study, putting these writings in the center, aims to argue that refugees are “‘intentionalized beings’ who possess and enact their own politics,” as Espiritu suggests in the critical refugee studies framework, even after “they emerge out of the ruins of war and its aftermath” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 11). Even if there is no promise of political action, negotiating those issues through their narratives is important for the younger Vietnamese as it enables a closer retrospection of their real-life experiences and serves as a source of knowledge.

CRITICAL REFUGEE STUDIES AND NATIONAL ABJECTION

Vietnamese refugees are “the human costs” of the US military presence and imperial desires in Southeast Asia (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 180). Their stories, thus, account for the realities behind the so-called “good war” narratives. On the power of refugee stories, whether it be fiction or nonfiction, critical refugee studies (CRS) scholars, including Yên Lê Espiritu, Khatharya Um, and Lan Duong write that they offer “*a refugee critique of humanitarianism*, delineating how humanitarianism originates from and reproduces unequal power relationships and how refugees experience and subvert this power differential” (*Departures* 77). In this context, tracing the history and absences inform the positionalities of these younger writers who, in a sense, carve against the strategy of “forgetting” the lived experiences of Vietnamese refugees. The war and its aftermath account for “the endings that are not over,” in the words of Espiritu, marking the ongoing complexities surrounding the Vietnamese lives even four decades after the US withdrawal from Vietnam (“Thirty Years AfterWARD” xiv). Consequently, their writings serve as an effort to think and reflect on these “endings that are not over.”

As an interdisciplinary field, the scholars of the critical refugee studies formulate “the refugee” “not as an object of investigation, but rather as a paradigm ‘whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems’” (Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee” 421). To accomplish this, the CRS advocates study of refugees through “the fulcrum of the intersecting discourses of militarism and war, migration and resettlement, and displacement and dispossession that continue to structure our past and present” (*Departures* 5). Espiritu underlines the criticality of reconceptualizing the refugee subject both as a “critical idea” and “social actor” who reveals “the relationship between war, race, and violence, then and now” (411). As she notes, the Vietnamese refugee life “when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and the global social change” (*Body Counts* 11).

Following the approach CRS promotes, this study aims to cast a critical light on the Vietnamese refugee experience through literary representations of the Vietnam War and

its aftermath. Putting the voices of younger generation Vietnamese at the center, Bich Minh Nguyen, Aimee Phan, Lan Cao, and Eric Nguyen address both their own and their families' displacement-emplacement processes, their identity struggles, and the gender issues in Vietnamese diaspora. As the representatives of the younger generation Vietnamese Americans (the 1.25, 1.5, 1.75, and 2nd generation), the authors are either survivors or witnesses of the Vietnamese collective trauma and displacement during and after the war. *Short Girls* (2009), *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012), *The Lotus and The Storm* (2014), and *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021) offer critical insights into the refugee perspectives and displacement experiences while they contest the issues of identity, belonging, violence, and the potential of reconciliation in general.

Simultaneously, these works of fiction give voice to the realities of female refugee lives that often remain unnoticed in the broader context of the Vietnam War and displacement. In doing so, their accounts, again, run counter to “the rescue and liberation” myth of the United States revealing the gendered, generational, and socioeconomic complexities embedded in refugee lives. Among various intersecting factors, gender dimensions of displacement and resettlement are of vital importance not only because of the patriarchal family and household structures of the Vietnamese society, but also the precarity and protracted refugee conditions the female refugees are exposed to during the war, dispersal, and resettlement.

In *Departures*, the CRS scholars draw attention to a formation of “crisis-rescue-gratitude” narrative around the Vietnam War and displacement in the Western world/imagination (15). This strategic framing of the US intervention shapes the reception policies of the Vietnamese refugees in critical ways and determines the challenges of Vietnamese lives. In the post–Cold War era, the displaced were “casted threats to be excluded and eradicated” (*Departures* 101). With the Vietnam War, the discourse shifted, and the displaced Vietnamese were presented to be the “the objects of rescue” who were “in need of care” (Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee” 410). This pretentious policy can be traced to the view of US of itself as “supersovereign power,” to use Mimi Nguyen’s wording, that justifies its “contravening international and domestic law in the name of exception” (29). The aftermath of the Vietnam war, however, suggests otherwise and

points to a state of insecurity for the US history that “instates . . . a new way of being, impacting both those deemed dangerous and detainable and also those who are provisionally recognized as legitimate persons” (168).

Thinking through the history of the minorities in the US national body, this contradictory impulse is inherent in the US policies reflected in the handling of the Vietnamese. In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996), Lisa Lowe explains the devastating effect of the Vietnam War on the American national psyche by defining it as “a disabling war” that shook the country’s understanding of the crucial concepts such as “community,” “nation,” and “culture” (3). In *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, Karen Shimakawa notes that, in the American national imagination, the Vietnam War implies an abject history that “has repeatedly reasserted itself as a ‘wound’ in need of ‘healing’ (and thereby disappearing in our national conscience and self-image) and that achieved a semipermanent ‘jettisoning’ by being overwritten with a U.S. ‘victory’ in the Persian Gulf in 1991” (14).

This political dynamic has found its reflection in the treatment of the Vietnamese war refugees. Throughout American history, Asian groups, including the Chinese, the Japanese, the Koreans, and the Filipinos have been important constituents of American national formation due to their critical functions during the particular historical times as railway workers, miners, and soldiers. However, their incorporation to the national body occurs through “the disavowal of the history of racialized labor exploitation and disenfranchisement through the promise of freedom in the political sphere” (Lowe 10). It was not until the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act that the Asian Americans obtained their citizenship rights.

Despite all the destructive actions taken in line with the idea of benevolence and humanitarian action, the US government as a representative of imperial and colonial logics of the Western world has handled the reception of Vietnamese refugees through a number of contradictory subject positions and policies. In this vein, starting in the 1970s, the Vietnamese refugees constituted the new target group of “national abjection” both as reminders of this unsuccessful war and as objects of rescue. Karen Shimakawa theorizes

“national abjection” to define the construction of Asian Americans as a subordinate, racialized, and sexualized group in the formation of national American identity (3).¹³ In other words, a prevalent anti-Asian sentiment enforced through political actions at home and abroad provides the basis for the formation of an “Americanness,” as an idealized national identity against “Asian Americanness” (3). Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory of abjection, Shimakawa formulates abjection as “a state and a process,” “a national/cultural identity-forming process, as a way of ‘reading’ Asian Americanness in relation and as a product of U.S. Americanness—that is, as occupying the seemingly contradictory, yet functionally essential, position of constituent element and radical other” (3). As she further elaborates, national abjection

is an (in)ability shared by the nation in its attempt to concretize national boundaries and that it is this inability that positions Asian Americans as a site of national abjection within U.S. American culture. Racialized as (always potentially) foreign, we nevertheless cannot be differentiated from the “legitimate” U.S. American subject with an exclusion carrying the force of law and therefore cannot be openly, completely, or permanently expelled; thus, to maintain the legitimacy of the dominant racial/national complex, the process of abjection must continually be reiterated or re-presented. (10)

At this point, Shimakawa poses national abjection “as a descriptive model of the particular forms of racial, cultural, and often sexual abjection that (partially) construct ‘minority’ and ‘dominant’ cultures in the United States” (165). To put it differently, abjection that is originally coined in terms of defining one’s subject boundaries could also

¹³ To have a better grasp regarding the nature of abjection, it is important to discuss Kristeva’s formulation of abject. Building on Freud and Lacan’s theories of subject formation, Kristeva comes up with an in-between stage in which the child separates itself from the mother “to develop borders between ‘I’ and other” (McAfee 46). In other words, in its original definition, abjection accounts for an individuation process where the subject separates from the maternal body through a rejection. In this vein, the subject goes through some stages to achieve an autonomous subjectivity. According to this, the baby is born into an imaginary state of unity—“chora”—where there is no distinction between the mother and the child. Before misrecognizing itself in the mirror, the child experiences a separation from the mother. To create the borders of the self, the child abjects the mother: “Even before being *like*, ‘I’ am not but do *separate, reject, abject*” (Kristeva, *Powers* 13). Kristeva differs from Lacan’s views at this point, by arguing that the subject forms the borders of “I” before the mirror stage. After misidentifying its image in the mirror, the baby enters into the universe of the symbolic where it meets with the language and power of representation. The point is abjection process is not “a passing stage in a person’s development. It remains a companion through the whole of one’s life” (McAfee 49). The subject always feels the threat of abject around its borders. Therefore, “[o]ur subjectivity is never constituted once and for all” (McAfee 43).

be used in examining social, political, and cultural exclusion of various minority groups.¹⁴ Those who are deemed “the other” are also insiders in terms of legal entitlements.¹⁵ Yet, they face social discrimination and inequality of opportunity with various stereotypes, functioning as ideological tools, forcing assimilation. Thus, with its “contradictory nature,” national abjection positions these groups both as perpetual outsiders and necessary insiders for the American national identity formation and solidifies its entity as a nation.

In line with the nature of abject, Shimakawa says, “*it does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object*” (3). As Kristeva writes, “[t]he abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-ject, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire” (*Powers* 1). It does not have definable borders, yet it is a menace that leads the subject to question the established borders of identity: “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I” (1). It is the abject’s potential to disrupt or unsettle the boundaries of the subject, or to use Kristeva’s phrasing, their ability to “disturb identity, system, order” because they do not “respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers* 4).

Considering the importance of abjection for the subject to distinguish between “self” and “other,” Shimakawa maintains that, “the literal and symbolic exclusion of Asians has been fundamental to the formation of (legal and cultural) U.S. Americanness” (5).¹⁶ In other words, the US Americanness is formed through subordinating the Asian groups. However, as Kristeva states, it is “the logic of exclusion that causes the abject to exist”

¹⁴ Although Shimakawa mentions that her theory of national abjection can be applied to any minority group, the history of war with Asia distinguishes it from other minority communities. Unlike the history of African Americans, there is a military defeat that constitutes an ontological threat to the US national existence and identity. Also, the socioeconomic success of Asians partly due to the pressure of assimilation also makes them suitable for examination under the framework of national abjection.

¹⁵ It was a conditional acceptance. Although the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act abolished the quotas regarding Asian immigration, it established preferences in admissions on the basis of family relationships and skills. According to the law, “no worker shall enter the United States *unless* the Secretary of Labor certified that there are *not* sufficient able and qualified workers in the United States and that the alien would *not* adversely affect wages and working conditions” (Keely 252).

¹⁶ Karen Shimakawa posits the term “national abjection” as a “descriptive model of the particular forms of racial, cultural, and often sexual abjection that (partially) construct ‘minority’ and ‘dominant’ cultures in the United States” (165). This dissertation analyzes the Vietnamese refugees in the US and France through the lens Shimakawa offers.

(*Powers of Horror* 65). Thus, the formation of national identity occurs through excluding, or to put it differently, abjecting the other group. As mentioned, national abjection is contradictory in its dual nature. It points to “the condition/position of that which is deemed loathsome and the process by which that appraisal is made” (Shimakawa 3). The process of national abjection is then characterized by “a shifting relation to Americanness,” for the Asian American, “a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation” (Shimakawa 3).

The Vietnam War points to a crisis in American national identity (Lowe 5). “Having lost the Vietnam War,” Y  n L   Espiritu claims, “the United States had no ‘liberated’ country or people to showcase; and as such, the Vietnam War appears to offer an antidote to the ‘rescue and liberation’ myths and memories” (“The Vietnam War” 304). In this political gridlock, using “the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees” as a substitute for their failure, the government and the media created “the good refugee” narrative that primarily serves to justify the Vietnam War as a “good war” (305). Nevertheless, as the subjects of a war history that the US demands of forgetting, the Vietnamese threaten “the very ontological status of ‘America’ [that] depends upon a tenuous, historicized, provisional, and contingent consolidation of nation against itself” (Palumbo-Liu, “Modelling the Nation” 213).

Therefore, Vietnamese American refugees could be read through Shimakawa’s lens considering the fact that the Vietnam War and the emplacement of displaced Vietnamese people point to such a process of abjection within US history (14). The “inability” of the US, emphasized by Shimakawa, to form physical enclosures essentially involves a military failure and a lack of success in providing those people with security and protection from destruction, violence, abuse, and neglect at the national and international level. As a result, the logic of exceptionalism, an instrument of global power and domination that failed through militarism, is maintained in the political, social, and cultural spheres through discriminatory practices against the refugees. To put it differently, the imperial logic that sustains militarism in the battlefield, transforms into racism, seeing minority people as threats. As Ronald Takaki exemplifies, [l]ike earlier Asian immigrants, the Vietnamese have felt the stings of racial slurs and have sometimes

been called “Chink” or told to “go back to China” (454). Through these representations, the inequalities are deepened and the refugee subjects are denied political representation and socioeconomic opportunities as national abjects.

Also, the refugee is “seen to pose a threat to public security because he has lost his rational, and thus moral, bearings” (Mimi Nguyen 63). In this regard, “when applied to the formation of national identity, abjection functions as a ‘frontier’ that marks the boundaries of cultural citizenship and national ontology” (Lee 154). Creating a discourse of “crisis” about the Vietnam War, the American government and the media maintained its national image by subordinating and racializing the Vietnamese identity. In this framing, the representation of the war refugees as “objects of rescue” and as “incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care” serves the US to position itself as the sovereign nation (Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee” 410).

Vietnamese reception and resettlement center around a number of political discourses that could be examined through the national abjection theory. National abjection solidifies the White national American identity and sovereignty, and it materializes in practices, discourses, and aspects of daily lives of the refugees in the form of discrimination. “It is through both individual and group rituals of exclusion that abjection is ‘acted out’” (Tyler 79). Vietnamese abjection is also closely related to overlooking and underestimating their Asian heritage and culture. The displaced Vietnamese American is the national abject because of being Asian and being a political refugee. Their foreigner status renders them potential breakers of the social order and, thus, causes them to be perceived as a threat to national stability. To diminish the dangers of this position, the Western governments and societies enforce their “superior” position on every occasion and restrict them to socially and racially less advantageous subject status. However, as Sarah Ahmed puts it, the thing—whether it is a person or issue—that is turned into an object through abjection is a substitute threat rather than being the real danger itself (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 86). The Vietnamese refugees are framed as victims to be rescued and put into the subordinate subject positions as a continuation of the discourses enforced for power solidification of the US government.

For the first-generation Vietnamese refugees, represented by the narratives of the younger generation in this dissertation, the performativity of this national abjection in resettlement seems to occur through a focus on their adaptability and assimilation. In the 1980s, the resettled refugees were presented to be “the desperate-turned-successful—that is, as the newest ‘model minority’” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 94). Positioning Asian Americans as the model citizens of the nation, “the model minority” stereotype is critical “in separating out Asians as particularly viable objects for admiration” (Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* 16).¹⁷ In other words, as a useful ideological tool, the model minority concept has served multiple purposes at critical historical moments. In the Vietnamese case, it includes a similar contradiction, inherent in national abjection. Regarding the importance of the the model minority myth for the reception of Asian Americans by the American public, “the popular depiction of Asian Americans as a ‘model minority’ illustrates the very contradictions that characterize abjection” (Shimakawa 13). While the Vietnamese refugees were racially, socially, and economically marginalized, they were also praised as achievers.

At a time when African Americans were demanding equal rights, the invention of “the model minority” myth was not a coincidence. One major purpose implied by this description is instilling “the belief that democracy ‘works’ and that the racism about which some ethnic groups complain is a product of their own shortcomings and is not inherent in the society” (Crystal 407).¹⁸ The resettled refugees, as CRS scholars write, “perform the ideological work of upholding liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality; they function as proof of the inclusive, tolerant, and fundamentally nonracist constitution of nation-states in the Global North” (*Departures* 105-106). In this regard, racial epithets such as “the good refugee” and “the model minority” stereotypes seem to

¹⁷ Although it was later extended to include Asian American groups in general, the term “the model minority” was first used in 1966 by William Petersen to refer to Japanese Americans in his article “Success Story, Japanese American Style” in *The New York Times* (Ono 322). As David Palumbo-Liu summarizes, the term encapsulates “the high educational achievement levels, high median family incomes, low crime rates, and the absence of juvenile delinquency and mental health problems among Asian Americans,” who were pitted against African Americans at the time (“Modelling the Nation” 217). The first use of the myth “the model minority” occurred shortly after the Watts riots in Los Angeles.

¹⁸ National insecurity at the time was intrinsically related to “America’s weakened position at home and globally” (Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* 214). The proxy wars abroad and the Civil Rights Movement at home were primary reasons that intensified the sense of threat felt by the nation.

work as part of “inclusive” operations of national abjection. The Vietnamese refugees were accepted only to improve the US image after the failure in Vietnam. Their adjustment efforts to survive made them good candidates for the nation’s propaganda. In this way, the Vietnamese refugee as “the good refugee” occupies the “position of consistent element” for the US as the abject (Shimakawa 3). Yet, their national perception as burdens in racial and economic terms keep them as potential subjects of exclusion within the nation’s unstable policies.

However, as David Palumbo-Liu argues, there are two important ramifications of this racial epithet: First, “how the model minority myth reifies Asian-American identity,” and second, “how it has been deployed in an eminently programmatic way against other groups, mapping out specific positionings of minorities within the US political economy” (“Los Angeles, Asians” 322). At this point, it can be read as a kind of avoidance strategy by the government to disavow its responsibility for the various forms of socioeconomic and sociocultural inequality of minority groups, including the Vietnamese refugees. Such discourses perpetuate and enable the “continuation of present programs that favor privileged constituencies and ensure that a scapegoat will be available to absorb dissatisfactions of the white majority” (Crystal 407). As such, the model minority stereotype has an implication related to Asian American identity since it designates “a social and political subjectivity” that is based on a contradictory ground: “albeit marginalized, serve as *models* for Americans” (Palumbo-Liu, “Modelling the Nation” 214). Importantly, an emphasis on their assimilation and enforcement of the model minority myth serves to make benefit of Asian cultural values such as discipline and hard work. Yet, it leads to the maintenance of a systematic enforcement of racial and social inequalities on the refugees. As it is pointed out by Eng and Han, “the model minority stereotype demands not only an enclosed but also a passive self-sufficiency and compliance” (46). Thus, an acceptance of their subordinate position is compulsory for being the model minority.

In “Critique on the Notion of Model Minority: An Alternative Racism to Asian American?” Chih-Chieh Chou draws attention to the construction of the model minority myth on the basis of Asian cultural heritage. He states that, “cultural difference becomes

the site of containment that confines Asian Americans to the status of the ‘minor’ and the foreigner” (223). This association that produces essentialist ideas related to culture is, in fact, a kind of covert racism that creates the delusion of a color-blind society. In the case of the Vietnamese Americans, the model minority stereotype is not only reinforced through cultural difference due to their Asian heritage but also through their political background as war refugees.

Nevertheless, as a requirement for creating a core national identity, Palumbo-Liu argues that, “[n]o matter how ‘ideal’ a subject might be constructed around the figure of the Asian, there must be ‘flaws’ or exceptions posited in the Asian as a way to reparticulate ‘America’” (“Modelling the Nation” 221). The popular narrative of the “refugee success story” during the post-war era was based on “flight, adjustment, and assimilation” (Espiritu, “The Vietnam War” 311). It restored the challenged legitimacy of the US and its claim for democracy at the time. However, their cultural and biological difference—linked to their racial and ethnic background—and political condition as war refugees do not enable a full inclusion or participation in the national body. The logic of American exceptionalism resurfaces again, and the Vietnamese are positioned as “the racial Other” once more to “celebrate the triumph of American democracy” (Palumbo-Liu, “Modelling the Nation” 226). Therefore, as the “radical other” in Shimakawa’s phrasing, the Vietnamese carry out the role of “‘abject foil’ for U.S. Americanness” (34).

Mimi Nguyen’s theory of “the gift of freedom” also provides a lens for examining these processes of becoming abject and what it means to be a national abject for the displaced Vietnamese. Studying the workings of US imperialism under the guise of a “liberal war,” particularly in the context of the Vietnam War, Mimi Nguyen terms the debt placed on the Vietnamese in return for their so-called freedom as “the gift of freedom” (3). She states that the “Liberal empire targets the subject of freedom as an incomplete person who lacks the properties necessary for self-government and who balances on the knife’s edge between antithetical futures” (51). The war was presented to be rather about the Vietnamese’s being bereft of self-determinacy than the political concerns and global interests of the American government at the time. In this sense, as she critically states,

“through the gift of freedom, liberal empire claims an exception to wage war, and to pardon its own crimes” (Mimi Nguyen 134).

Similarly, the later processes of resettlement were operated through the same altruistic dynamics. After all, for the US government, “the propaganda value of accepting refugees fleeing communism was central to the US foreign policy goal of broadcasting its brand of ‘freedom’” (*Departures* 87). Nevertheless, as Mimi Nguyen writes, the unsolicited offer of freedom “demands a reciprocal return of value that cannot be simply repaid in financial terms. . . . [A] lasting gratitude” is expected from the refugee subject in return for the freedom given through the so-called humanitarian intervention (169). Aside from disclosing the logic behind the US intervention, Mimi Nguyen’s concept is important in terms of how the debt burdens the present Vietnamese experience while they are dealing with the weight of trauma, loss, and displacement. As she elaborates: “Debt is all these things—a revenant, a ruin, a reminder of what has been lost—but debt is also a politics of what is given in its place. To be indebted is to continue to live after war and dispossession, but with these things not having ended” (182).

The gift of freedom and gratitude, the mandatory byproducts of the so-called humanitarian military intervention, works as an interpellative force that shapes refugee lives and identities/subjectivities as subordinates. Critically, this indebtedness determines not only the contradictions, embedded in political and economic conditions, but also the US’s expectations of the refugees. The refugees were expected to reciprocate the “gift of freedom” by exhibiting gratitude for the forces of capitalism and racialization in their daily lives. As a result, in Vietnamese displacement, the gift of power and gratitude reinforce the subjugation-subjectivity that national abjection brings about for the Vietnamese refugee.

Returning to the model minority stereotype, as a subtle embodiment of the contradiction of national abjection, it seems that the myth offers a chance for achieving the American Dream for the Vietnamese abject. As illustrated in some of the works examined in this study, the model minority myth is necessarily adopted by the refugee families during their emplacement processes to a certain extent for survival and transition. However, their

symbolic inclusion into the society occurs mostly through their necessary racialized labor in American capitalism, which simultaneously assigns a precarious abject status to them, open to exploitation and marginalization. Their refugee status and racial/cultural differences, coupled with their tenacious link to Vietnam are perceived as a threat to the dominant national American identity as a liberal force. Regardless of the degree of their assimilation, Asian Americans can never pass as the majority (Chou 222). Likewise, the myth as a racial category creates “an ‘American’ norm that Asian Americans can never achieve” (Chou 222). Their minority status is what America benefits most from to consolidate its power and authority, mitigating the challenges to its national identity.

Kristeva’s concept of foreigner (stranger) is also useful to discuss another stereotype about Vietnamese identity and belonging in relation to national abjection: Asians as “perpetual others” or “perpetual foreigners.” Kristeva sets the definition of the foreigner in terms of nationality, noting, “the foreigner is the one who does not belong to the state in which we are, the one who does not have the same nationality” (*Strangers* 96). For the uncomfortable relation of the Western nations with the foreigner within national boundaries, however, she looks at Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and describes the arising anxiety towards the other as “uncanny/unheimlich.”¹⁹ She says that “[i]n the fascinated rejection that the foreigner arouses in us, there is a share of uncanny strangeness” (*Strangers* 191). In Freud’s original definition, the uncanny is “actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (*The Uncanny* 148). Hence, Kristeva conceptualizes her concept of the foreigner according to Freud’s “return of the repressed” as she associates the reaction of society to the foreigner as uncanny/unheimlich.

Abject is relevant to the uncanny as Kristeva states, since abject is “[a] massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either” (*Powers* 2). Thus, the uncanny quality of the foreigner echoes abjection and bothers the subject due to both its familiar and unfamiliar nature and

¹⁹ Freud makes use of the root, “heimlich”—“familiar,” to emphasize the ambiguity embedded in the term “unheimlich,” meaning familiar and unfamiliar.” He conceptualizes unheimlich as “the return of the repressed” (124).

threatening quality of the ontological being of the subject. To put it simply, an otherness resides as an internal uncanny feeling in every individual and is repressed through the unconscious mind. Kristeva articulates that “[t]he foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious” (*Strangers* 191). Yet, when the nation state encounters with the foreigner/other,—or the subject/citizen with the abject/refugee, an “uncanny strangeness” surfaces and the foreigner becomes the target of exclusion and source of unease. Because the foreigner causes the national subject to remember their own foreignness and the fragility of their subject positions in the nation state, “Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel ‘lost,’ ‘indistinct,’ ‘hazy’” (*Strangers* 187).

Hence, there is a close relation between the abjection of refugees and Kristeva’s concept of the foreigner. The refugees, to use the words of Viet Thanh Nguyen, are “unwanted populations” for the uncanny feeling they awaken in people:

They bring with them the stigma of disaster. That scares people who are not refugees, people in potential host countries, because the refugees are not only going to be a demand on the country’s resources, but also the refugees raise the possibility that the countries that they’re going to are themselves not as stable as the citizens would like, I think. We’re all just one catastrophe away from ending up as a refugee, and we don’t want to be reminded of that. (Bethune)

In the Vietnamese case, the refugees as national abject foreigners are reminders of the repressed past the American nation state tries to deny and erase. Nevertheless, the presence of the refugee tests the permeability of the boundaries of the nation and the self. In this sense, national abjection has a lot to do with Kristeva’s concept of the foreigner in studying both the foreign status of the Vietnamese refugee in displacement and the uncanny feeling they evoke for the “national” citizen. The first-generation refugees and some members of the younger Vietnamese this dissertation refers to experience the long-term unjust consequences of their foreigner position and end up internalizing “foreignness” as a personal feeling. It causes a nostalgia and a sense of sadness for the past and their country of origin.

On the other hand, Kristeva's concept of the foreigner can also be used to describe the feeling of the younger generation Vietnamese, who disengage from their abject history, and, thereby, their Vietnamese identity. The alienation from one's roots, especially observed in the second-generation Vietnamese in this study usually occurs with the contribution of the parents who adopt a silent treatment of the war history. Identifying with their American identity more, the younger generation is not aware of their estrangement from their roots most of the time. As Kristeva writes: "Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided" (*Strangers* 181). Nevertheless, for the second-generation Vietnamese, realizing this disidentification at one point is important for reestablishing a link to their authentic cultural identity and reconstructing their relation to their abjectified history. This endeavor by the younger generation distinguishes them from the older generation. Although delving into the Vietnam War history constitutes one of the main reasons of the generational conflict, it is an act of empowerment on behalf of their Vietnamese roots against the national abjection. Their novels, as a form of literary expression, disclose the hidden realities of their lives that constitute a threat to these dominant narratives.

Whether because of a lack of history or trauma of the war, the younger Vietnamese go through an identity confusion. Even if they have no direct experience of the war, "[t]he abject continues to haunt the subject's consciousness, remaining on the periphery of the awareness" (McAfee 49). For Kristeva, Lechte argues it is critical to confront the abject, so that the subject can cope with "the unnameable basis of our [their] depression. . . . We need to put hell into the symbolic, to describe it, name all its aspects, experience it in imagination, and so constitute ourselves as subjects with (new) identities" (190). In the face of unattainability of a stable Asian American identity, the Vietnamese American youth achieve their version of success.

Confronting their abject history and their foreignness to their Vietnamese roots activates the potential of the Vietnamese youth as "subject[s]-in-process," to use Kristeva's term, again. On the complexity of the subject, Kristeva notes that "[o]ur subjectivity is never constituted once and for all" (qtd. in McAfee 43). Recognizing this fluidity and dynamism and going after the abject history do not always offer reconciliation but provide a chance

to move on. In either case, their potential makes them “subject[s]-in-process,” which is a promising formulation, in Kristeva’s account, to overcome the limitations of racial and national disparities.

Considering the promise of CRS for a reconceptualization of the refugee subject as a venue for social and political critique, it is critical to direct attention to the Vietnamese refugee life and to trace their exercise of agency while they are positioned as victims. The Vietnam War, as it was called in the US, was a product of “Western imperialism and militarism that have been masked by humanitarian practices and pronouncements” (*Departures* 89). Against the willful sociopolitical negligence of the Western governments towards the dehumanizing transition processes and the challenges of resettlement for the refugees, the CRS scholars draw attention to the performativity of refugeeness. They argue that “[a]s subjects of humanitarianism,” refugees are “hyper-aware of the need to perform vulnerability and gratitude” (93).

Observed through the literary works by the younger generation Vietnamese in this study, with their direct experience of war and flight, the first-generation Vietnamese have to engage in national abject subject positions in line with the model minority stereotype and expect their younger generations to act accordingly. Though not always, their adherence to these politically constructed positions can be taken as “calculated performances of gratitude,” or better said, a “strategic performativity” of refugeeness (*Departures* 94). As CRS scholars write, “refugees’ ‘strategic performativity’ is more than a defensive tactic that ensures survival and prosperity in a sponsorship-based economy; it is also a calculated action that exposes the uneven distribution of global resources as refugees maneuver to gain entry, shelter, and provisions” (94). In each of the novels analyzed, it is seen that the members of the first generation have to develop different tactics or skills to overcome or to just live with these disadvantages of the refugee status. This effort involves both material and psychological conditions to be dealt with.

STRUCTURE OF THIS DISSERTATION

Subsequent generations question and destabilize these abject positions stemming from their own traumas or imposed by society and their families. In doing so, they confront

and display the conditions and contradictions of refugee lives. Building on national abjection by Shimakawa and CRS, this dissertation aims to discuss refugee lives through the narratives by these younger generations who go beyond traditional perspectives in terms of content. They display the conditions that cause them and their families to become refugees and emphasize their agency to live with these dynamics. Each chapter is divided into three main parts, discussing their displacement-resettlement processes, gender issues mostly experienced by Vietnamese women, and identity crises of the younger generation Vietnamese. The first generation had to live as national abjects. Yet, at the same time, there is a strategic deployment of these historically and politically enforced subject positions by the Vietnamese refugee. Likewise, their descendants use those restricting frames to their advantage to recognize and reclaim their past. These narratives illustrate that these people were active agents of their destinies.

In the first chapter, the national abjection of the Vietnamese subject is examined through the Luong family in Bich Minh Nguyen's *Short Girls* (2009). The father figure, Dinh Luong, perceives his short height as the primary factor of his status as the racial abject. Height as a genetic physical attribute basically becomes a symbol of the inadequacy the Vietnamese feel to become fully American. Dinh Luong tries to overcome its consequences by designing some props—the Luong Arm—to retrieve items from the high shelves—the Luong Eye—to enable people locating others in the crowd—and the Luong Wall—a system of adjustable shelves controlled by a remote—for shorter people like themselves in the basement of their family house. He sees these tools as an opportunity to prove himself to his family not only as a father and husband after losing his authority in the resettlement, but also to the Americans as a Vietnamese refugee, demanding recognition. When he gets a chance to show them off in a talent contest, however, Dinh Luong fails to describe his tools as a result of his poor English. Dinh Luong's struggle symbolizes his being stuck in racial and capitalist systems of power that deny acceptance and incorporation.

Furthermore, Dinh Luong's internalized abject status has certain reflections on the lives of his two daughters, Van and Linny. Despite their different personalities and paths in life, they have similar insecurities regarding their height, and it results in their developing low self-worth. While Van tries to cope with her insecurities, adopting the dutiful

daughter role through her job as a lawyer and marriage to a rich Asian man, Linny disavows the societal and familial pressures, dropping out of school and leading an independent life in Chicago. Both sisters suppress their Vietnamese identities as much as possible to achieve a belonging to the American society. However, the feelings of inferiority in relation to their racial and socioeconomic background as refugees persist until they give up seeking external validation and start working on their strength and emotions as national abjects themselves.

In the second chapter, Aimee Phan's protagonist, Cherry in *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012), assumes the role of a "detective" who goes after the legacy of the war along with her extended family history to resolve what haunts them (Traina 114). The poor reception conditions in the abject space of refugee camp put the refugee women into a precarious situation open to abuse. Without the direct experience of war, Cherry, as a second-generation Vietnamese, explores the loss and desires to find a sense of belonging while pursuing the silence that causes the double rupture of the Truong and Vos families both in the territorial and the psychic sense. To Phan, her work "meditates on the painful choices family members make during times of war, and how those decisions have enduring consequences for future generations" (Phan, "Artist Statement"). The novel illustrates the consequences of US intervention by showcasing the flight conditions and racist and discriminatory reception. The dynamics of national abjection start at the camp space where the liminality of the refugee subject and their indeterminate situation at the mercy of Western powers foreshadow the systematic exclusion, they are going to confront at the host nations.

Years later, the younger generation experiences the negative effects of displacement and resettlement policies as confusion and alienation from their origins. Therefore, Cherry's search also marks a search toward her identity as a second-generation Vietnamese daughter. Her feeling of Americanness informs her abjection and stranger status to her Vietnamese roots that she had not been aware of until she went to Vietnam. In other words, a journey to Vietnam, and therefore, to their abject history, enables her to negotiate the taken-for-grantedness of her Americanness that she brags about. In doing so, Cherry takes a critical step in investigating the dynamics of survival that the older generation

hesitates to take in the face of years-long pain and hardships. While the older generation family members show a resistance against confronting the past and their choices, Cherry's insistence on looking into her past for answers can be interpreted as a kind of moving forward on behalf of her family. Their displacement and resettlement processes within the hostile American and French societies indicate the physical and psychological problems that the younger generations still try to resolve. In this context, Cherry's search for history and truth brings her closer to the Vietnamese self and enables an examination of the processes that have led to the internalization of the national abject status by her family.

In the third chapter of this study, *The Lotus and The Storm* (2014) by Lan Cao, who is 1.25 generation Vietnamese, is analyzed in terms of the abjection of South Vietnamese masculinity during the war and abjection of a Vietnamese child by her war-traumatized mother. Featuring a former South Vietnamese soldier's, Minh's, reckoning with the past, Cao offers a reading of South Vietnamese masculinity, tested not only on the battlefield but also in family and friendship settings. Furthermore, the novel gives away the background of American intervention in Vietnam, illustrating the political construction and maintenance of American hegemonic masculinity through military force in Vietnam. Minh's threatening abject status, as a South Vietnamese soldier, father, and husband, represents the oppression of South Vietnamese masculine subjectivity, which is left without will and autonomy to govern a war of their own as a nation and protect his family as a man. Their current national abject refugee status in America partly results from the failed struggle of American hegemonic masculinity, disguising itself as a rescuer in the political arena.

When it comes to its effects on the younger generation, Mai, who is Minh's daughter, comes forward as personally marked by an eternal abjection process that deprives her of a stable and secure mindset due to violently-impaired boundaries of her identity. The traumatic murder of her sister, as a result of an assassination targeting their father, causes her to develop a dissociative identity disorder that leads her to be stuck between her Americanized and Vietnamese selves. While abjection in the psychosexual development of a child is a critical step towards identity, an abjection enacted by the mother in the form

of emotional rejection of the child creates a paralyzed sense of self for the Vietnamese child. Mai is adversely affected by her mother's psychological and physical absence due to the symbolic and actual separation processes the war has caused. Mai's turbulent mental status as a child and grown-up reflects the psychological consequences of being exposed to war and becoming a child refugee. Her current status in America as a settled Vietnamese refugee with a "proper" job does not enable her to have a peaceful mindset, as her Vietnamese self becomes an aggressive inner voice and prevents her from cutting her ties with the past. Therefore, her fragmented identity not only reveals the lingering effects of war on the refugee psyche but also claims a negotiation with the power mechanisms responsible for the destruction in the first place. The act of negotiation with the past is important for Mai in terms of coming to terms (or not) with the present. Consequently, the continuing negotiation with the past and the potential of healing do not offer a linear process for Mai who has lived through the war.

In the last chapter, taking single motherhood as a refugee as a starting point, the displacement and emplacement processes of a small Vietnamese family, consisting of a single mother with two sons in Eric Nguyen's *Things We Lost to the Water* (2021) are analyzed. Shifting the lens to a Vietnamese male author in this part, this study aims to provide a perspective on the Vietnamese refugee experience through the relationship of the Vietnamese refugee mother and her sons in the resettlement. Leaving Vietnam on a boat when her husband gives up getting to the boat at the last minute, Huong destabilizes the universal construction of motherhood that takes mothers' sacrifice as granted and unchanging. As both a single refugee mother and a woman of color, she tries to enact her mothering duty by herself while wrestling with the structural inequalities in the American society. However, as the only breadwinner and caregiver as a single mother, Huong has to prioritize her children's physical survival over their emotional needs. Her struggle displays the conflict in the system that contradictorily positions her as a part of the exploitative labor industry while forcing her to fulfill expectations related to gender roles. Over the depiction of a national abject single refugee mother, Nguyen offers an inside story of stereotypes about Vietnamese Americans and expectations built around motherhood.

Furthermore, Nguyen's novel offers a look at the younger generation Vietnamese identity struggle through Vietnamese gang culture and queer identity. For the Vietnamese youth, involvement in a gang seems to be a potential outlet for overcoming the interwoven issues of race, displacement, and poverty. Tuan's becoming a school dropout and gang member in America while being the smart child of a Vietnamese professor in Vietnam points to the negative effects of the disrupted family unity. More importantly, it also points to the changing social class in displacement that affects the younger generation of Vietnamese on the emotional and social level. Family disruption and father's absence because of the war and displacement also affect the younger Vietnamese in terms of coming to terms with their racial and sexual identity. The younger sibling, Binh, who adopts an American name for himself, Ben, exemplifies the precarious situation of becoming an autonomous subject in the absence of a father figure with his national abject position in the background. His decision to move to France, where his father once lived, and effort to create his writing career on his own can be read as a representative act on the part of the second-generation Vietnamese who transgress the socio-structural barriers that enforce conditional subject positions for their community, such as the model minority and grateful refugee image.

Broadly speaking, abject corresponds to "a process of differentiation" (Albayrak 1470). In this dissertation, this differentiation is examined at the national and personal levels through Vietnamese refugees and their children. Each chapter features the experience of Vietnamese families, offering a diverse representation and response to this political and social construction. Although national abjection is a common experience for the Vietnamese refugees, their responses to structural discrimination vary depending on the place, the circumstances they face and the context of separation from Vietnam. In order to survive, the older generation usually has to act through the abject stereotypes such as the model minority and grateful refugee. However, their experiences cannot be reduced to a single assumption but rather offer a broad range of issues for discussion. More than victims, Vietnamese refugees are ordinary human beings with their vices and virtues. The enforcement of Vietnamese cultural forces on the younger generation causes a conflict with the American culture that they are born into or are raised within, and thus, they experience national abjection, usually by abjecting their Vietnamese self. Kristeva notes

that identities are “infinitely in construction, deconstructible, open and evolving” (Kristeva, “Does European Culture Exist?” 2). The identity negotiation for the younger generation is ongoing. While this dissertation looks at the formation of refugee subjectivity as subordinate to white American culture, it argues that the younger generation embraces their national abjection as presented through their literary representations. The abjection of Vietnamese history is another theme that leads the refugee families to distance themselves from their roots. Thus, this study explores the Vietnamese refugee’s various responses to dispersal, structural racism, and their losses through specific cases.

Accordingly, through the literary works by the younger generation Vietnamese, this dissertation also aims to emphasize the social and political dynamics at play, starting from the war. In doing so, it offers an alternative perspective on the US refugee discourse that registers Vietnamese displacement and their integration processes through the victim stereotype in the American national imagination. In these narratives, reckoning with the past and dealing with memories are inevitable. Tracing collective and family history to reclaim what is denied to them (sometimes by their family and at other times by US militarism), the younger generation Vietnamese American authors challenge “the rescue and liberation” myth by revealing “the failure,” in Janette’s words, of the US in dealing with the war consequences during and after (“Vietnamese American” 11). The writers’ preoccupation with the questions of what it costs them to survive and leave the homeland, as well as the possibility of “moving on,” are some of the common threads that bind all these works together. Instead of optimistic accounts, they illustrate how racially charged reception policies, coupled with silences, unanswered questions, and unresolved family issues impact their lives. Their version of the refugee experience includes interweaving forms of precarity and dispossession followed by downward mobility and lingering trauma in the host country. Set against the backdrop of the US role in generating Vietnamese relocation in the first place, the novels delve into how Vietnamese families navigate through operations of power in the larger historical and quotidian context. In doing so, they not only challenge the American narrative of the Vietnam War as a humanitarian effort, but also illuminate the limitations of the American Dream, particularly for the refugees in this context.

In this study, each novel constitutes a vast and critical part of this exploration of the legacy of war, their wartime, camp, and resettlement experiences. As opposed to the formation of Vietnamese subjectivity around victimhood and gratefulness, the older generation seems to adopt a simultaneous defensive and defiant strategy against overlapping losses of home, child, and husband, to name a few. The dilemma of the will to survive and protect loved ones while dealing with loss and trauma illustrates how some wounds, as a consequence of (un)willed choices, transcend and persist beyond spatial location for the remaining family members. The younger generation's reclamation of these memories is an act of reformulating memories built around tropes of victimization. Moreover, these young writers voice their abjection to challenge their politically and socially imposed passive victim status. In doing so, the younger representatives of Vietnamese American literature pay off their debt of gratitude to their parents (though it seems to be an act of "ingratitude" in Vuong's sense) while negotiating "the gift of freedom" the American government delivered. Their accounts contribute to the potential construction of more integrated societies where the diversities of each nation are respectfully recognized.

CHAPTER 1

“THIS IS A COUNTRY OF TALL PEOPLE:” HEIGHT AND BEING A REFUGEE IN *SHORT GIRLS*

Short Girls is Bich Minh Nguyen’s 2009 debut novel. She came to the US as an eight-month-old Vietnamese child refugee as a 1.75 generation Vietnamese. She won a 2010 American Book Award for her *Short Girls*. With her *Pioneer Girl: A Novel* (2014) and her latest nonfiction *Owner of a Lonely Heart: A Memoir* (2023), Nguyen is an established author on the Vietnamese American experience in the Midwest. Growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a mostly white-populated area is inescapably reflected on her works in terms of negotiating her Vietnamese identity. In *Short Girls*, the higher concentration of white people in the Midwest determines not only the dynamics in the Luong family, but also their social, cultural, and political relationship to the larger American society. In this respect, Nguyen traces the Vietnamese experience through the Midwest and puts forward “the particularity of regional difference” (Cordell 386). The cultural and political minority status of the Luong family in a predominantly white state makes them more vulnerable to the dynamics of national abjection.

As the title suggests, height is a major issue in the novel in terms of Vietnamese identity. Two female protagonists, raised with their father’s obsession with height, experience its lasting effects as various forms of insecurities in their social, personal, and professional lives. They are shorter compared to the average American: “Van is “5’ 1/8” and Linny is 4’ 11” (61). It creates a feeling of inadequacy, which is not limited to their sense of height. As Sheng-Mei Ma comments, *Short Girls* “focuses on the drawbacks of Asian birthright, including but not limited to: not white enough, not tall enough, not American enough, not woman enough” (108). In a way, feeling short embodies a general feeling of incompetence in relation to being American. Under the pressure of the model minority stereotype, the members of the Luong family try to create their own kind of accomplishment story. Thus, the novel offers a particular reading of gender, class, and race within the refugee context, coupled with individual vulnerabilities.

The post-9/11 milieu as a historical setting also provides a specific background due to the changing government policies and tightening immigration policies that negatively impacted all minority groups, including the Vietnamese. The Department of Homeland Security was established in 2002 and discussions related to immigration policies and border control were brought into discussion. As political stress affected the inclusion and exclusion mechanisms of the state at the time, Nguyen's narrative illustrates its reflections in Vietnamese refugee lives that were already dealing with the changing family dynamics and the socioeconomic disadvantages of displacement. With vulnerable subject conditions, stemming from their national abject positions, they feel the insecurities embedded in their refugee status over their short stature.

The story of *Short Girls* focuses on the Luong family who flee Vietnam in 1975 and settle in Michigan. Twenty-eight years later, the two sisters, Van and Linny return to their family home for their father Dinh Luong's citizenship party. Mr. Luong gets his US citizenship, finally breaking his obstinacy. The sisters are reluctant to visit their father's house which they had left after the demise of their mother. Even though they have different personalities and paths in life they have similar insecurities about their self-value. Despite the fact that Van, the elder and dutiful daughter exhibits a self-assured, successful woman image as an immigrant lawyer and in her marriage with Miles Oh, an affluent corporate lawyer of Chinese descent, she does not feel "enough." Linny, on the other hand, is a college dropout, feeling stuck in her position at a restaurant, *You Did It Dinners*, where she works for the white women who do not cook. Not fulfilling her potential in either romantic or career terms, she also goes through a sense of a devalued self-worth that she tries to alleviate by living as an independent city girl. Their inner struggles reinforced by the psychological pressure of their short height become a sense of "inadequacy" in social and emotional terms.

As mentioned earlier, *Short Girls* carries autobiographic traces from Bich Minh Nguyen's life. In an interview, she says, "I've always been conscious of height and interested in the ways it can affect one's identity and self-perception" ("*Short Girls* Readers Guide"). In this vein, Mandy Thomas writes how the perception of low stature is common among the Vietnamese particularly as an aspect of comparison: "This physical difference is

perceived by them to be a marker of alienation and subordination” (Thomas 80). Just like Minh Nguyen states, her novel represents how exclusionary political and sociocultural mechanisms even affect the perception of one’s physical attributes. Thus, *Short Girls* is a good example of revealing not only “the connections between the Vietnamese American community in the Midwest and political narratives over who belongs and who should be excluded,” but also the coping mechanisms of the displaced Vietnamese (Cordell 385). As short people in a white-dominated state, the members of the Luong family develop low self-esteem that severely reflects itself in their relationships.

It is important to remember that the Vietnamese American, like all refugees, coming to America, hope to rebuild their lives. In their effort to integrate into the host country, Karen Shimakawa critically asks, “to what extent Asian Americans must radically jettison parts of themselves in order to be identified as U.S. American?” (86) As she maintains, “abjection structures [the other’s] abilities to see and be seen” (161). Corresponding to “a sense of inadequacy and illicitness,” being short symbolizes both being short of white normative standards and being denied economic and social privileges in the face of structural racism and discrimination. Similarly, the experiences of the Luong family correspond to feelings of abjection both in a personal and national sense due to their feeling of incompetence. Yet, their low self-evaluation of their physical attributes is the result of the inequality of opportunity and unpredictable government policies the Asian subject is exposed to as national abjects. In *Short Girls*, Bich Minh Nguyen, thus, draws attention to the negative psychological and material consequences of the racial and political power structures on the individuals.

To overcome the disadvantage of his height Dinh Luong has invented various props such as the Luong Arm, the Luong Eye, and the Luong Wall in the basement of his house to ease the lives of short people. Van and Linny have also internalized the negative implications regarding their physical traits, including gender-based stereotypes and end up developing low self-esteem. While Van seeks to reverse it through her academic achievement and good marriage to an Asian, Linny resists these social expectations and lives her life as an independent city girl in Chicago. However, neither of them finds contentment in their lives. Minh Nguyen’s book offers a critical perspective of the

younger generation of Vietnamese on identity in the Midwest. The metaphorical connection between Vietnamese body perception and culturally/socially “falling short of Americanness,” to use their mother’s phrase, adds up to multiple challenges in each character’s life. Height, as a genetic marker, signifies the characters’ feelings of personal and national abjection. Nevertheless, the pressure to meet social, cultural, and economic expectations turns into an inner conflict that forces each character to prove—or choose not to prove—themselves through various means. This chapter will argue that looking for external validation as an outcome of national abjection reinforces the feeling of inadequacy for the Vietnamese refugee. The feeling is entrenched in inequality of opportunity that negatively affects Vietnamese self-perception.

1.1. BELONGING AND THE IDEAL AMERICAN

Short Girls opens with the elder daughter, Van’s preoccupation with her father’s citizenship party after quitting his “twenty-eight years of stubbornness” (3). As Minh Nguyen writes: “her father was finally taking his oath of citizenship, letting go at last of his refugee status and the green Permanent Resident Alien Card” (3). When Thuy Luong, their mother, applied to get her US citizenship after completing the necessary procedures years before, seeing it as “a matter of pride and duty,” Dinh Luong refused to get involved in the process (Minh Nguyen 127). Uncomfortable with the racist sentiment for being required to take a citizenship test, he defiantly asks: “‘You think it’s so special being the normalized citizen,’ he had said, as if it were a taunt. ‘Why not all people in America have to take the tests?’” (127). In an interview, Bich Minh Nguyen also reflects on her conflict about the symbolic nature of these processes, aiming to measure one’s sense of belonging and loyalty:

While I don’t think someone has to be a U.S. citizen in order to be an American or feel like an American, I do think the process of naturalization is significant. Wouldn’t it be interesting if everyone, whether born here or not, could choose to take the citizenship test and oath? It certainly made me further appreciate what it means to be an American, especially given how this country has been shaped by waves of immigration. (“*Short Girls* Reading Guide”)

Despite her seemingly tolerant mindset towards these kinds of legal procedures, Minh Nguyen has an ironic tone in her answer against a system that targets and tests the loyalty

of immigrants. Broadly speaking, citizenship guarantees a set of rights and promises within certain legal frameworks of a particular nation. However, thinking through Asian American history, citizenship also functions as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, as is the case with the Chinese, Filipinos, and Japanese.²⁰ As Lisa Lowe writes, the Asian immigrant was crucial to “the still developing capitalist economy” due to their cheap labor, especially from 1850 to World War II (12). Their inclusion into society always depended on their being a source of labor and the untimely change of politics. Thinking through the propaganda value of Vietnamese refugees for the American government, their reception and presence are also bound to the construction of the US as a winning and powerful country. Therefore, Asian American position is historically built on an unstable foundation. As the national abjects, the position of Asian Americans in the American national body, in Shimakawa’s sense, is marked by a sense of uncertainty in the face of unpredictable social and political moves.

Shimakawa draws attention to “anti-Asian racialization,” starting with the Chinese that is built on an assumption that they are “as fundamentally different from (and inferior to) a ‘norm,’ as politically and biologically not-‘American’” (2). Yet, Chinese men constituted the backbone of the labor force in America between the second half of the 19th century and WWII (Wang 59). Examining this contradictory attitude through her national abjection theory, Shimakawa emphasizes the categorization of Asian American groups in relation to Americans also on the basis of biological difference. She writes, “the legal parameters of U.S. Americanness have been premised on racialization (and sexualization) in order to construct the ‘ideal’ subject of the law as an Anglo-European heterosexual male” (4).

²⁰ All these immigrant groups experienced exclusion through certain laws and legislations in America at certain time periods. For instance, while constituting an important labor force in the transformation of the West, the Japanese were confined to the internment camps by Executive Order 9066 during WWII. Despite their hard work, their loyalty to the state was also tested when they were drafted into the American army to fight against their country of origin. Filipinos, who were promised US citizenship and benefits in return for fighting against the Japanese in the Philippines, were denied receiving those benefits by the Recission Act of 1946. The Chinese, on the other hand, who were one of the oldest immigrant groups with a considerable amount of labor in building America, were subjected to many discriminatory laws throughout history, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In all cases, their effort to build life and sacrifices made for the US benefit were overturned by the unstable government policies.

The developing American economy during the Westward expansion was powered by the Chinese immigrant men to “meet the need for cheap and easily exploited labor” (Wang 59). The hostility and frontier dynamics led the Chinese men to find themselves “feminized jobs such as cooks, laundrymen, and domestic servants” (Wang 60). Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that “capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it” (qtd. in *Departures* 4). Thus, there is a systematically formulated practice of discrimination and exploitation of immigrant groups that sustains American capitalism (Kennedy 8). The emasculation of Chinese men through these effeminized jobs contributed to their being positioned as inferior racial groups. In this regard, as Omi and Winant state in *Racial Formation in the United States*, “the United States has always been an extremely race-conscious nation. From the very inception of the republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and indeed one’s sense of identity” (8).

In the Vietnamese case, the changing demographics of immigration after 1965 transform the new agents of exploitative labor. There is an increase in the number of female immigrants that created a boost in female-dominated occupations (Espiritu, “Gender and Labor” 83). To put it otherwise, the historical oppression enforced on Chinese men through racism and sexism extends itself to the Southeast Asian lives after the mid-1960s as the confinement of men into the houses. The need for cheap and exploitative labor started to be met by Southeast Asian women. This points to another racial and gendered formation of an Asian group, in this case the Vietnamese, within the American nation.

Yến Lê Espiritu articulates that Vietnamese refugee men need to “carve out a place for themselves and their families in America” within the context of “war, displacement, and racism” (“Vietnamese Masculinities” 93). This is because arriving in the United States, Vietnamese men found limited opportunities for occupation and faced racial prejudice as distrusted foreigners (Kibria 8). The force of capital should be added to this equation as Lisa Lowe puts it, the active participation of immigrant women in the labor market plays an important role in the “restructuring of capitalism globally” (16). After the 1960s, the increase in the female population and the female-intensive industries signifies “an index of new forms of contradiction” and “a new gendered international division of labor” that

relies on the workforce of immigrant women (16). Thus, the changing pattern in the labor market, demanding a female workforce, brings out a restriction on men, experiencing a sense of being stuck.

For the first-generation members of the Luong family, who came to the US as refugees in 1975, having American citizenship would supposedly bring a state of safety that they thought to be worth their years-long struggle because of the war and displacement. This is why Thuy Luong completes the legal processes to attain her citizenship. Aside from its legal benefits to her daughters, she underlines “an extra sense of security” it will bring, for “she didn’t want her daughters to be alone as Americans” (127). Her move despite Dinh Luong’s tenacious mode can be examined through two perspectives: Fear of family separation due to the experience of war and displacement, and the feeling of threat as the national abjects due to the distrust in the government. It is obvious that the trauma of war and displacement plays a critical role in not only developing a sense of belonging but also securing one’s place in resettlement. Critically though, American policies and political instability affect the refugees’ self-perception regarding their constantly shifting position in society as national abject refugees.

For other Vietnamese refugees, just like the Luongs, after finding safety, material income is important to secure a life for themselves and their families. However, limited availability of jobs restricts the Vietnamese man’s capacity, as in the case of Dinh Luong, whose social inclusion and social mobility are also negatively affected in resettlement. As a result, alienation holds a huge part in Dinh Luong’s life. While he was an engineering student in Vietnam, he could not attain his degree for unmentioned reasons most likely related to the war. In America, he is a displaced South Vietnamese refugee man who is making a limited amount of money from “his ‘everyday money jobs’ in tiling and construction” (4). To overcome his socially and economically disadvantaged situation, Dinh Luong designs and develops some props such as the Luong Arm—to retrieve items from the high shelves—the Luong Eye—to enable people locating others in the crowd—and the Luong Wall—a system of adjustable shelves controlled by a remote—to ease the lives of short people like themselves. It starts with the Luong Arm, and it is his elder

daughter, Van's inability to get a cup from the cupboard in the kitchen that inspires him to create the products. The Vietnamese community supports him by buying from them.

Dinh Luong's preoccupation with height is a significant issue that signifies Vietnamese community's permanent abject status in American society and is a symbol of Dinh's effort to gain recognition. In "Estranged Bodies and Vietnamese Identities," Mandy Thomas writes: "the body is a constant reminder that people are from another place" (81), and it becomes "the root of marginality because of the ready stigmatization of corporeal difference" (75). Apart from being a politically and economically disadvantaged group resulting from the refugee discourse, the negative body image due to their short height underlies the insecurities of the Luong family. At this point, being short particularly comes forward as the main reason for Dinh Luong's feelings of insecurity who could not maintain his role as the breadwinner. Therefore, he defines his feelings of exclusion in socioeconomic and political terms over his physical attributes, saying: "[t]he average height of American men is five feet nine and one-half inches. That is tall. We live in this country with some of the tallest people. That's America. But for guys like me, like Vietnamese, it's five feet three" (59). He thinks his props are his only chance to prove himself as a Vietnamese refugee father and husband.

A consequence of the new pattern in the capitalist power structure mentioned above is "the change in immigrant women's and men's relative positions of power and status in the country of settlement" (Espiritu, "Gender and Labor" 81). In other words, the changing position of Vietnamese women alters the family dynamics. It is Thuy Luong, the mother, who has a constant job due to greater chances for women in the labor market. With her main breadwinner role, she starts to assert dominance in the household. Although the Luongs came to the US as a family, they experienced separation in time and started living in different parts of the same house, "a sixties ranch in Wrightville, a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan" (4). Van mentions how an occasional "petty argument" between her parents turns into a rearrangement of their living spaces and relationship: "[T]his time when Thuy Luong told her husband to go sleep in the basement 'like a dog,' he stayed there instead of slinking back upstairs" (4). Apart from the emotional detachment between Dinh Luong and his wife, it is the economic challenges and their

reflections on the family dynamics that drive the family apart. Given that Thuy Luong is the new breadwinner of the house, her humiliation of Dinh as “a dog” hints at the changing hierarchy in the house, especially considering Vietnamese traditional family life. It is usually customary for the Vietnamese woman to occupy “a subordinate position” in the household (Kibria 45). However, this opportunity for the Vietnamese woman to work is named as “exercise of new freedom” by Takaki, who continues saying “[t]hrust abruptly into a very different culture, the Vietnamese find their traditional family ties severely strained” (456).

In this regard, the changing family structure shows the lower social racial structure and inequality of opportunities that the refugees face in resettlement due to their politically and biologically abject position. Dinh Luong experiences economic oppression, a process that Espiritu claims is “not only gendered but also racist” in the US (*Asian American Women and Men* 5). Thuy Luong looks down upon Dinh Luong’s lack of skills as she claims her husband “always prefers the fake work” (Minh Nguyen 122). Yet, the couple continues to live together. In spite of these inner tensions, Nazli Kibria talks about the families’ clinging to the “cooperation and collectivism” in the traditional Vietnamese family system that they see as a safeguard to “the ‘selfishness of the US family and culture” (9). Minh Nguyen writes,

Van was secretly glad that they hadn’t just given up and divorced. In her mind, they couldn’t—they were too conjoined, had known too many years together. Ornerly as old house cats, they needed each other’s presence without ever admitting it. They could have gone on like that for decades, Van knew, living together but not together, meeting only occasionally when Van’s father needed to get some towels or utensils from upstairs or when Van’s mother needed to use the washer and dryer. (6)

When their father begins to live in the basement, the children, living with the family at the time, also experience the change in the living arrangement of the house. Yet, they never confront the conflict between their parents openly: “*What happened?* she’d [Linny] wanted to ask him, her mother, and never did. Later she supplied her own answer: *Work. Other people, America.* It was the immigrants’ answer” (25).

In this context, Thuy Luong's pride in getting citizenship and voting is inevitably related not only to the changed gender hierarchy but also to Dinh Luong's emasculation in social and familial terms in the resettlement. On the surface, attaining legal rights and political participation seems to be a step towards becoming a naturalized member of society. Therefore, the US citizenship gives Thuy Luong a sense of power and recognition even against her husband in legal terms. For instance, Linny remembers her mother's first time as a voter for the 1984 presidential election: "'The three of us can do this, but your ba cannot,' she had explained. 'And it's all because we're citizens.' Her mother had tugged Linny close as if to emphasize the divide between them and her father" (127). However, working in a sewing job at Roger's Department Store, Thuy Luong is stuck in a dead-end job. She considers transferring to working at a friend's nail salon when the store is going to be permanently closed. Before it happens, she dies in 1994, "collaps[ing] in her best friend's nail salon" (6). The doctors see it as "a stroke, rare for a forty-two-year-old, though they never knew for sure because Dinh Luong had refused an autopsy" (6). Importantly, though, the early demise of Mrs. Luong reveals the cost of exploitation on the refugee body, as well as showing how the Vietnamese masculinity is deemed deficient in terms of sustaining the family.

Dinh Luong's national abject status denies him the capacity to support his family. His feeling of failure manifests itself as a desire to prove himself through his inventions as a refugee father and husband. Remembering Shimakawa's questions regarding the extent that "Asian Americans must radically jettison parts of themselves in order to be identified as U.S. American," it can be stated that Dinh Luong repudiates his Vietnamese refugee status, which is symbolized by his height. Dinh Luong's obsession with height is a defensive response against his national abjection, and he tries to turn it into a source of wealth to get a secure place in the American society. Therefore, he has no such intention of being identified as American, as it is seen in his resistance towards getting the US citizenship. However, his lack of relevant skills and technical expertise as a result of his uncompleted engineering degree in Vietnam does not allow him to introduce properly functioning, complete products for a very long time. For instance, his first invention, "the Luong Arm, a tong-like gadget devised to help short people reach items on a high shelf," is "most successful invention—or least unsuccessful" (4). It is never "quite right," says

Van, since “the mechanical grip could grab a light basket, but lost control with the plates and glasses” (5).

As such, Dinh Luong’s obsession with height and refusal to get citizenship for years symbolize his struggle with dealing with his declining power and status in resettlement with the structural racism and discrimination. He represents one of “the voices of many men of color [that] have been historically silenced or dismissed” that King-Kok Cheung asks white scholars to take into account (246). In a system that forces assimilation as the criterion of success, being short becomes a marker of his inability to assimilate and integrate. Therefore, *Short Girls* is a good example of revealing not only “the connections between the Vietnamese American community in the Midwest and political narratives over who belongs and who should be excluded,” but also coping mechanisms by the displaced Vietnamese (Cordell 385). Unjust political and sociocultural policies and practices affect the self-perception of the refugees. Dinh Luong engages in self-abjection at one point by attributing all the challenges of their lives to his height. He has a file including the list of “Famous Short People” on his desk, with the help of Van, who gathers and brings all the information to her father from the library. To Van’s occasional questioning to break her father’s insistence on height as the underlying reason, he defends himself, saying: “This is a country of tall people.” Dinh Luong’s insistence echoes his internalization of the national abjection.

The basement becomes a refuge and can be taken as a microcosm of the family’s life in Michigan, where they try to compensate for their outsider status, as the conflict forces him to stay isolated. Due to its white majority and bad weather conditions, Michigan is not a favorable place for the Vietnamese settlement: “Growing up, it had seemed improbable to Linny and Van that so many white people in Michigan had sponsored Vietnamese refugees, and the Vietnamese had not only stayed but increased their numbers. Every winter their parents complained about the cold but they never thought about leaving: they were going to stay where they had landed” (100). The presence of a community, especially the Bao family as family friends, plays an important role in sticking with the decision to continue living there.

The Baos, a Chinese family, also set an example in achieving the American Dream apart from providing a family and community support for the Vietnamese families in the area. A family friend, Truc Bao, who later goes by the name Rich Bao, for he makes a huge amount of money from his dry-cleaning business, exemplifies the “rags to riches” model of the American Dream for the other minority families. Although Dinh Luong shows agency rejecting to be a part of the model minority as a low-wage earner, his inventions are his means to pursue the dream since he “believe[s] in the possibility of striking it rich and winning the lottery” (287). Dry-cleaning business as a continuation of the laundry business is an established ethnic enterprise for Chinese men. This not only signifies the continuation of this patriarchal mentality that employs Asian men as the source of racialized labor, but also indicates that Chinese men use it to their advantage to secure their place in the capitalist structure.

As previously mentioned, the novel begins with Dinh Luong’s enthusiasm for his approaching citizenship party. His desire to be “recognized as the inventor” of his tools plays a role in changing his attitude towards US citizenship after living almost three decades in the US: “In America, we don’t belong until we make them see it. It’s not a piece of paper with *citizen* on it” (133). He thinks his application for a patent for his inventions was rejected due to his status as a permanent resident. Hence, his change of decision regarding citizenship can be interpreted as strategic in terms of using the legal benefits rather than cultural or political incorporation, which he is both exempted from and abstains from as “the perpetual foreigner.” It is when coming to terms with his Vietnamese refugee identity that he tries to align with the majority. As Cordell puts it,

becoming a citizen isn’t just about a document for Dinh Luong, but rather reflects a larger coming to terms with his identity in relation to the US and to the immigrant community. By taking the oath of citizenship, he both leaves his refugee status behind and re-embraces the Vietnamese community that experienced those early years in the US alongside him and his family. (393)

Consequently, it is for their father’s citizenship party where he enthusiastically invites and waits for the members of the Vietnamese community that Van and Linny will return to their house in Michigan years later. As Van conveys, he imagines his party to be “a reunion, a remembrance of their collective flight from Vietnam and settlement in

America—1975 all over again” (Minh Nguyen 3). Dinh Luong admits his status as “the other” only when he is given a chance to prove otherwise. In spite of the fact that he gets his citizenship as a way to secure a patent for his inventions, the Luong Arm, the Luong Eye, and the Luong Wall, his broken English prevents him from explaining the function of the instruments at the show:

Linny cringed at his deteriorating English and thickening accent, the way he was even now falling into an embarrassing Mr. Miyagi-like cadence. His eyes darted from camera to camera. For once in his life, perhaps the only time in his life, he was attempting to make good on two decades of promises; he was trying to stand in front of that panel of judges and pitch his work, let it go forth to critics, the world, when Linny and Van had never truly thought he could. And he was going to blow it all with his unsteady English. (Minh Nguyen 255)

Dinh Luong’s poor speaking performance at the show displays his social anxiety due to his accent. However, it is the cumulative result of exclusionary policies that lead to his avoidance of social and economic participation in the wider American society, and spending most of his time at home. The citizenship that testifies to one’s political loyalty to the state only points to a symbolic formal procedure on paper, both for Thuy and Dinh Luong. They never achieve a full cultural and economic adaptation to the wider society. Yet, they try to reverse the negative consequences of their national abject status by working through it.

Irene Bloemraad writes, “[i]n the United States, migrants—in this case refugees—understand citizenship as offering rights and legal protections, such as protection from deportation, as well as economic opportunity, notably the freedom to achieve economic success” (9). Although the Luong family overcomes economic uncertainty to a certain extent, buying a house with Thuy Luong’s savings, structural racism does not allow for an easy economic, social, or cultural integration. Systematic exclusion directly affects their participation and self-perception in society. Despite the fact that citizenship grants a sense of security especially for her children, it does not ensure a better life with a sustainable income and increased living standards.

The success and recognition that Dinh might achieve through his inventions will not only satisfy his desire to prove himself but also offer a possibility of (re)claiming the American Dream, by winning a prize worth \$100,000. Nevertheless, his forced isolation that causes him to spend most of his life in the basement, working on his tools, results in his incompetence in English. Minh Nguyen's commentary in the beginning of the chapter about the formality and irrational logic in forcing the immigrants to take a test for citizenship also becomes apparent in the scene where Van takes her father to lunch. Even after he finally takes it, Van observes him as "anxious":

"They ask me, 'Who is Betsy Ross?' I don't remember that in the book you gave me," he said, referring to the exam guidebook she had sent him. "So I say she was married to a big president. The lady laughed. But I passed the test." He didn't seem that happy about it, so Van took him to lunch at a Chinese buffet. They ate mostly in silence, her father repeatedly getting up for more king crab and fried shrimp. Several times he seemed to forget where they were sitting, and Van had to wave at him to call him back. (52)

Even though he cannot answer the questions correctly, he passes the exam and gets his American citizenship. His condition points to how symbolic these naturalization processes are and cannot be taken as a measure to evaluate one's degree of competency in being a citizen or gauge one's loyalty to a state. However, the sense of failure bothers him, as he reexperiences the feeling of inadequacy that he has been struggling with intensely for years. Making a phone call to give Van the news, he says "I'm a hundred percent American" (50). His words convey sarcasm and refer to the formality. His identification with America only occurs on paper, rather than as an emotional commitment.

Short Girls is a Vietnamese narrative that shows that cultivating a sense of belonging is rather a complex process, connected to a decades-long policy of mistakes and their effects. Fleeing war and persecution in Vietnam, many Vietnamese refugees experienced an involuntary migration after the abrupt withdrawal of the US forces. As other chapters of this study illustrate, the connotations of war and dispersal vary according to people's individual experiences of trauma and loss on many levels. Moreover, their emplacement experience may also differ in terms of their place of resettlement. The novel, featuring Vietnamese experience through a family living in the Midwest, offers a reading of height

as a symbol of institutional racism as a part of national abjection and the struggle of the Vietnamese refugees who try to reverse it into a source for a creative inspiration.

1.2. CLASS AND MARRIAGE

The presence of Vietnamese refugees in American society involves a contradictory state of abjection that holds them in a tenuous position beside the white national body. Hence, Asian Americanness points to a shifting category that forces the Asian subject to be on the brink of inclusion and exclusion. Height, functioning as a source for aspiration for Dinh Luong, thus serves as a marker of unassimilability and preservation of otherness as an internal feeling, in connection with race and gender dynamics. As Bich Minh Nguyen explains, “His inventions aimed at improving the lives of short people are genuine and literal, but they’re also representative of his desire for visibility and equality. He wants to be seen” (“*Short Girls* Reading Guide”).

For the Luong daughters, who are born and raised in the US, height also stands at the intersection between race and gender stereotypes. The negative perception of body image by the Luong family, accompanied by a feeling of “inadequacy,” also manifests itself in Van and Linny, in terms of their social status and perception as women. The formation of such self-perception in relation to physical attributes lies in the parental attitudes that internalize racism. Dinh Luong instills in girls the idea that being short is a disadvantaged status in America and forces his daughters to compensate for it by excelling in something somehow: “*Short girls have to take care of themselves*” (Minh Nguyen 5). In this vein, a similar demand for “visibility” in societal terms is desired by his daughters, particularly the elder sister Van, who unwillingly inherits the internal otherness. Through her marriage to Miles, a fourth-generation affluent Chinese and a popular guy from law school, she thinks she gains it. Thus, when her husband files for a divorce, her world, built in line with social expectations, is shattered, leaving her to continue wrestling with her insecurities.

Other than Dinh Luong’s citizenship party, another major concern in the book is Van’s preoccupation with her husband, Miles’ abandoning her. Working at the International

Center, “a hub of immigrant law in downtown Detroit that brought Latino, Asian, and Middle Eastern communities into its fold,” Van seeks to help “asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants looking to sponsor relatives” (44). However, the heightening tension following the 9/11 events triggers a series of events, starting with Van’s loss of the Vijay Sastri case, uncovers her insecurities with the event’s negative effect on her marriage. Either way, she does not feel “enough” as a daughter, lawyer, and wife, feeling overwhelmed by her failure as an immigration lawyer, her deteriorating marriage, and her father’s material expectations.

Van’s internal strife about the problems in her private and professional life is intricately related to their position as a racial abject. She is determined to overcome the hardships through hardwork and a career. Acting within the confines of a dutiful daughter, she gets into law school where she meets Miles. Miles’s “elite” status compared to hers deceives her, for she believes her marriage will bring her the privileges and recognition that she lacks due to her socioeconomic background. In discussion of submission and authority in male-female relationships, Jessica Benjamin states that, “submission to authority is itself is an erotic experience” because “submission to a powerful other” can be “understood as a means, however problematic, of securing or freeing the self and, at the same time, finding recognition” (150).

Van’s feelings of insecurity as the child of a nationally and socially abject Vietnamese refugee family reflect themselves as an insecurity related to her short height. She has an internal pressure to achieve, coming from familial expectations, thinking that success will provide a satisfaction and reverse their socially and economically disadvantaged situation. Although these expectations seem to originate from their cultural heritage that puts an emphasis on hard work and discipline, they are related to being a political and ethnic minority in American society. Thus, her ambition related to her career and life is mostly conditioned by these political and societal norms. On the conditional inclusion of Asians as national abjects, Shimakawa writes:

Praised and valued for their ability (and inclination) to *assimilate* into the “mainstream” (with an eye toward eventually disappearing in/as it)—indeed, to surpass even “normal” Americans (that is, whites) at being ideal manifestations of American success and self-determination at a particular

historical moment (the early period of the civil rights movement), Asian Americans were singled out for their aptitude for conforming to dominant models of “proper” American citizenly values and practices (including subjection to the law, heteronormative and patriarchal “family values,” and especially the pursuit of higher education), over and against what were seen as other, less tractable, more antihegemonic racialized minorities. (13)

Clearly, Asians are defined by their capability to adapt to and even surpass the Whiteness or Americanness that is offered to be the ideal in terms of building family, educational attainment, and being law-abiding citizens. Nonetheless, the requirement is usually neglecting one’s roots and identity and clinging to the hope of achievement through individual effort. On the equitation of whiteness with success, Bich Minh Nguyen states:

Basically I’ve been taught (most people are still taught) that “American” = white, and that white is the norm and the default; everyone else is still expected to assimilate, and ask if they belong, and wait to be included. If there’s one good thing to emerge from this current political landscape/nightmare, it’s a growing national awareness that the old model doesn’t hold up and cannot stand. (Williams)

With her high academic performance and career ambition, Van fits into the model minority stereotype and dutiful daughter. Her marriage to Miles also puts her under the label of “the good Asian daughter” (155). Miles’s social status has a positive role in Dinh Luong’s acceptance of him as his son-in-law. When “Van’s father had inspected the prongs that held the diamond in place,” he says, “Good thing we love Chinese food” (Minh Nguyen 7-8). It is Van who financially supports the family after her mother’s death as the dutiful daughter. Nevertheless, the existing political mode regarding the refugees denies them a secure position in the national body and impairs their ability to build a positive self-concept. It is important to state that Van does not develop an inferiority complex like her sister Linny and his father do. Yet, sticking with the hard work as the society and her family assume it as the way to success and fulfillment does not make Van feel less inadequate due to her national abject state which she has internalized.

Although Van and Linny are raised in the same household, they have different personalities and opposite attitudes in terms of their careers and choices in their private life. While Linny exhibits a stark contrast to the Asian stereotype of a dutiful daughter, Van moves within the boundaries of filial piety:

When their mother returned from work, her hands cramped from a full day of sewing, she would smile to see Van studying. “Good girl,” she would say to her. To Linny Mrs. Luong would shake her head, make a low noise at the back of her throat to express her thoughts about Linny’s bird’s-nest hair and rainbow makeup. She wasn’t home enough to control how Linny looked. (57)

Filial piety as a Confucian doctrine is usually adopted by the eldest child in Asian families and involves providing the family with the economic resources as a sign of obedience and respect (Kibria 131). This tendency is seen in Van’s effort to achieve. Likewise, the Vietnamese families rely on the children’s success for social mobility (132). Therefore, Van’s ambition provides hope for her working-class refugee mother, who bears most of the economic and parenting responsibility in the Luong family. Examining filial piety as an affective response to family obligations, Erin Khue Ninh argues that:

Filial piety as an affective disposition is a learned responsiveness to coded stimuli. It is a heightened, habitual sense of inadequacy, of indebtedness—a posture from which dissent is instantly defused or even obstructed, compliance easily surrendered. It is guilt on command, concession on tap. (“Affect” 50)

Thus, filial piety sometimes functions as a self-protection mechanism for the child who wants to meet parental expectations, since the children need parental emotional support. It is also critical to mention that growing up in a refugee family makes the pressure to achieve a better future through individual effort stronger and inevitably affects the child’s response to these ideological doctrines. In the Vietnamese case, filial piety and the model minority stereotype go hand in hand in terms of the latter’s emphasis on “the idea of individual responsibility” (Lieu 19). The occasional acceptance of these ideological constructions in Vietnamese families is interpreted as a desire “to project a trajectory of self-sufficiency that they believed led to progress and to some semblance of normalcy” (Lieu 19). However, as seen in the Vietnamese community in general and the first- and second-generation members of the Luong family in particular, achieving self-determination and gaining a sense of “normalcy” are not easy processes for the national subjects with fragile self-conceptions like the Luongs.

Therefore, her failure at the workplace also becomes a traumatic crisis affecting her in every aspect of life. When one of her clients, Vijay Sastri is deported, her sense of failure

negatively impacts the existing fluctuations in her self-esteem. Besides, the event coincides with her miscarriage and precipitates the downfall of her marriage. An immigrant working on an H1B visa and planning to bring his family to America, Sastri is caught with a gun in his car after getting involved in an accident in 2001. The incident has an immense adverse effect not only on her professional life but also on her self-conception: “[T]he loss—her first and only—hit her hard” (49). Interestingly, her husband Miles is also confused about the occasion as Van observes: “It hit Miles too, seemed to shake him into a state of mind, of intensity, she’d never seen before” (49). Sigrid Anderson Cordell comments that with the Vijay Sastri case, Nguyen reveals “another romanticized mythology: that of the “typical immigrant story” (Cordell 393).

The tightening immigration policies of the US in the post 9/11 era are a case in point that proves the unstable position the immigrants—refugees always have. The establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) are a few of the signs of increasing national and public tension against minority groups, specifically Arabs. Cordell mentions, Mr. Luong perceives his citizenship “divorced from broader political events” (384). However, Van, as a lawyer, sees her father’s application as a timely decision: “It is a really good thing we sent your application when we did” (Minh Nguyen 51). Van’s precaution is related to the defensive mode by the US in the face of a threat that has the potential to shake “the conceptual borders protecting a phantasmatic U.S.” (Shimakawa 14). The attacks on 9/11 led to a “re-emergence of a new variant of demonizing discourse of American nationalism, which was mainly in practice during the Cold War” (Asl 156). In other words, the ontological insecurity and the failure in the national security system is reflected towards the minorities in the form of a common antagonism. As an educated, abject Vietnamese refugee child, Van is conscious of the potential consequences of this sentiment.

The effects of the nationally ambiguous status of Asian Americans could thus be observed in Van and Miles’ relationship as their insecurity manifests itself as doubt in her abilities as a lawyer and woman. From the beginning of their relationship, it is Van’s enthusiasm and promising talent that entice Miles. To Linny, Miles is “[o]ne of those rich, been-here-

for-generations Asian American guys” and “calculating, like a lawyer” (67). For Van, his interest in her is unpredictable as she considers herself “the kind of girl guys either overlooked or talked to because they needed her study notes” (33). The great-grandson of Angel Island Chinese immigrant from the West Coast, Miles has “the confidence that came with growing up fourth-generation, surrounded by other Asians” (34). With the comforts of his family, he has no specific interest in law or political matters as Van does: “Miles had been impressed by her motivation, called her studies noble” (35).

For Van, the biggest motivation in marrying Miles is to “feel not just noticed but *seen*” (Minh Nguyen 34). As mentioned earlier, he is “[o]ne of those rich, been-here-for-generations Asian American guys” (67). Van’s marriage offers her a chance for her to move up the social ladder: “In so many ways he embodied an immigrant dream of immersion and status, and Van felt the burden of having married up and into it” (46). In short, her marriage is an opportunity to escape from the insecurity she feels as an abject. Nevertheless, her negative beliefs about her self-value and the incompatibility due to her family’s different class background cause Van to feel lesser: “She was a suburban girl who had married a city guy, and that truth never left her for long” (45).

As an already racially-abjected Vietnamese refugee, Van also becomes an abject through her marriage to Miles not only due to her social status, but also to her failure in her job and her inability to become pregnant. Her miscarriage and losing an important case as a lawyer threaten the illusory order Miles establishes for themselves. Thinking that abjection is also a form of suppression of one’s drives to become a subject in the symbolic order—the realm of law and language—it can be stated that marriage is a unit in the patriarchal symbolic order that can function as an instrument of power for the woman. In this vein, with its rules and principles as a social institution, it can also function “as a way to counteract the disquieting experience of encountering the abject” (Kızılay 1192). Similarly, being a national abject himself, Miles renders Van abject with his domineering attitude. Miles’s superior attitude influences Van, regulating her lifestyle and behavior in social and cultural terms. Their life is designed by Miles from the furniture in the house to the cooking utensils, and Van submits herself to the order made by him. She finds herself pondering: “She never could quite keep up with his expanding knowledge of

which restaurants to go to in which cities. He knew how to select ripe mangoes at the store and make his own ice cream. How did he manage it?” (221)

The scene where Miles is not at home shows how Miles’s presence even affects Van’s way of spending time at home: “Watching television in her usual way, lying on the sofa so that everything on the screen appeared sideways, Van was glad that Miles could not see her like this. If he were home, she would be sitting with a glass of wine, playing an indie movie since Miles called network television a scourge on the brain” (7). In her husband’s presence, Van forces herself to adopt the culture of the so-called higher class, such as drinking wine, and distances herself from what she finds enjoyable. However, watching TV is a childhood habit for her and “a mainstay for the whole family,” as Minh Nguyen writes (17). Despite the sense of guilt for her luxurious life that stands in contradiction with the job she does, she is happy for the prospects Miles offers to her. In their house, “Van touched the egg-shell walls and thought, what more could be wanted?” (33)

In terms of her ethnicity and social position as a lawyer, Van is also a good candidate for Miles, the son of a well-off Chinese family. Miles benefits from Van’s compliant nature and hard work as an Asian stereotype rather than developing an affection for Van’s femininity. Feeling it, Van is always haunted by the envy of Miles’ friends, after she finds a frame featuring their past happy picture. Julie’s perfect image activates Van’s self-doubt. Consisting of women, Miles’ friends seem “happy, taller than Van, well dressed” (38). Among them, Julie, Miles’ ex-girlfriend, bothers Van most, especially when she finds out that they are still in touch. Miles justifies their staying friends again through a conceited manner, disregarding her feelings: “You can’t be jealous of my having friends. I never understood people who aren’t mature enough to be friends after a relationship ends” (38). Van’s suppressed feelings reflect themselves as a “puncture, an invasion” (38). Van is aware of the fragility of their relationship and Miles’ lack of romantic desire for her. Her devotion to her career and grief over her miscarriage are a part of her effort to be a member of the society who has had it all.

Miles's attitude can be interpreted as a projection of his own inferiority complex that he tries to hide through his luxurious lifestyle. He benefits from his family's material and social status. Likewise, he approaches Van for practical terms as Minh Nguyen writes, "He loved her devotion to immigration law and her funny, frog-like laugh. She was smart and clear-headed and she knew just where she wanted to go in life, he said, so why waste any time?" (41) He praises Van's ambition while simultaneously underestimates her passion in helping immigrants: "Van's a fighter. It's that Napoleonic complex put to good use" (78). Being on the more opportunistic side of his job, Miles cannot comprehend Van's dedication and desire, and hence, interprets her effort as a way to compensate for her stature. In this way, he also plays an important role in making Van internalize the idea that being short is a handicap.

It is not a coincidence that when Van loses the Vijay Sastri case and changes her job, Miles decides to break up with her. To Van's objection, he excuses himself saying: "When we first got together, we were a real couple. You had your ambition. Potential was everywhere. And now, as you well know, Van, it isn't" (118). Therefore, it is not Van's effort in helping the immigrants but rather her prospect of future success, her potential to subvert their abject status that kept Miles near her. After all, Miles is also "fundamentally different from (and inferior to) a "norm," as [he is] politically and biologically not-"American" (Shimakawa 2). As a result, Miles positions himself as a well-adapted immigrant of a certain class and constitutes an example of good "performance of Asian Americanness" albeit a cultural and political abject (3). When he sees that Van endangers this illusion, Miles leaves her. Similarly, the scene where Van confronts Miles and his mistress is important for displaying Van's intense feelings of inadequacy in the face of a woman who fits into the socially constructed idealized feminine beauty:

Van had dreaded this face-to-face, expecting to feel miserable hatred and jealousy. The very thought of Grace—perfectly Asian American in a poised, smooth-skinned way that Van had never been—had filled her with a desperate rage. And she wasn't wrong. Grace was her very name and Van, standing near her, felt every ounce of her own smallness. She was a clunky utilitarian van. The only thing left for her was complete humiliation. Abjection. It took her a moment to place, to name, the feeling. It flattened her, rendered her speechless. (232)

Through Grace's statuesque posture, Van engages in self-abjection, particularly over her body. Abjection, in its most basic sense, is a process of differentiation of the subject from (the maternal) body (Kristeva, *Powers*). The confrontation echoes Van's disidentification with her body that the Luongs see as the source of insecurities in social and personal terms related to their national abject Vietnamese status. However, the sort of abjection Van feels at that moment corresponds to feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness that Van has as a woman. Grace threatens her sense of being that she builds on success and possession rather than emotional connection and self-reliance.

It is important to state that Van's feeling of insecurity as a woman is in part tied to their insecure status as national abjects, passed on to them through their father: "Short girls have to take care of themselves," says her father Dinh to her on her college graduation, giving her a prototype of the Luong arm as his gift (5). To put it in another way, the idea of "inadequacy" is enforced by her parents, specifically her father Dinh, who is extremely self-conscious about their height as a family. "*This is a country of tall people*," he says on one of his occasional visits upstairs, where he does not miss the chance of making a small talk with his wife and daughters (59). Talking about "the plight of short people in America" is one of his favorite subjects during these encounters, as he rhetorically asks "Did you know that men who are short have hard times getting jobs?" on one occasion (59). Her father's complaining inevitably reflects in Van as a strong sense of feeling unworthy:

Van believed she wouldn't care so much about being short, wouldn't continue thinking about it still, if the subject hadn't always consumed her father. But it was the one thing he liked to talk about, the one thing she could get him to talk about. His pronouncements at the dinner table—about how short people were discriminated against, and how short people had to work extra hard to get good salaries and respect—well, these did seep into Van's thoughts (183).

Resettling in a place where being tall is the norm, the short stature of the Luong family contributes to their feelings of inferiority. The sense of inadequacy that seems to be resulting from their negative body perception reveals other insecurities related to their status as refugees and the material conditions that the racial dynamics create. What they lived through, the struggle to manage the socioeconomic and political challenges, places them as "a new underclass" that conflicts with the model minority stereotype (Lieu 21).

As a refugee family sponsored by an American family, the Oortsemas, class is also an important factor determining the experience of Van and Linny.

The small population of the Vietnamese community affects the Luong family negatively in their personal experience and social interaction. When they decide to buy a house with the savings of Thuy Luong, they select the area according to what the Oortsemas, their sponsors, advise that they should choose a house from a good school district. Thus, they become “the only Asians in the neighborhood” (169). The absence of racial diversity in the area, except for a Chinese and black family, who suddenly move away, greatly contributes to their feelings of being outsiders. As Minh Nguyen writes: “Maybe if the Luongs had moved a little farther west of town, into the heart of where the other Vietnamese families had settled in Wyandotte, things would have been different. Where Tom and Lisa [children of family friends] had immersed themselves in the Vietnamese community, Linny and Van had become outsiders” (170). Living apart from the Vietnamese community leads to a more isolated life for the family and to feel the strain of class difference: “As Van grew up and went to school, she understood what it meant to live in such a place. She learned about working class, middle class, blue collar. The house seemed smaller every time she returned from college, and never more so than when she brought Miles here to meet her father” (142).

While Van avoids the Vietnamese parties and becomes more involved in her studies, Linny turns into “a white girl,” as Mrs. Luong criticizes her (170). All these components reinforce the lack of self-confidence in Van, since her self-doubt cannot be reduced to one variable:

There's a core insecurity about you, Miles had told her once. This was weeks before their wedding, when a sentence like that could both shatter Van and make her determined to be the opposite. I'm not criticizing, he added. I'm just curious about where it comes from. Van didn't say what she really thought: Didn't he think she'd tried to figure that out a thousand times already? She'd blamed her height, and being Asian in a mostly white, conservative town in the Midwest, and sometimes called it a shyness coded into her genes. Van had never explained to Miles, or to anyone, how exhausting it was to work against the sense of inadequacy that arose whenever she felt on display—whether it was on the Model UN team or in the courtroom. She had been standing on her tiptoes for most of her life. (183)

Van's insecurity, hence, reflects itself in her desire to be approved by American society, her family, and Miles, yet it never happens. The relatively higher socioeconomic family status of Miles and later his being a corporate lawyer make it possible for him to impose a sense of superiority on Van. Since she builds her self-conception on her job and marriage with Van, a failure in either devastates her as she confronts her fragile self-concept related to her Vietnamese identity. Within this context, height intersects with being a refugee and being nonwhite. In other words, race, gender, political status, and physical traits all overlap and create multiple forms of oppression for the Luong family while each character experiences it in their own way. Although it seems that being short is the main problem for her feeling of otherness, and for their family in general, it is the norm of whiteness in every aspect that pushes Van to feel inadequate. Her obsession with and dedication to work is an effort to compensate for it. Accordingly, she never feels "enough," for her, her sense of superiority gained through her new socioeconomic status and feeling of being "chosen" is subject to fragility, illustrated in her disappointment and emotional stress.

1.3. REBELLIOUS VIETNAMESE IDENTITIES

Unlike Van, Linny's way of overcoming the inherited and socially imposed feelings of abjection occurs through rejection of the Asian stereotypes. As Erin Khue Ninh suggests, the "sense of inadequacy and indebtedness" that manifests itself as a conformity to filial duty "can yield different, unintended actions and expressions instead" ("Affect/Family/Filiality" 50). The daughter's response might be "defiance rather than obedience" (50). Trying to explore different fields through courses in school, Linny is "losing interest before declaring a major" (Minh Nguyen 63). To her father and sister's dismay, who think that "she would waste her life without a degree," Linny moves to Chicago with her boyfriend after her mother's death because the school is "[t]he path of least resistance," for her (Minh Nguyen 62-63). Therefore, Linny fulfills her childhood dream and compensates for her lack of interest in education by starting to live as a city girl.

As the youngest and the shortest member of the Luong family, Linny "possesse[s] a genetic gift of self-confidence" as opposed to her elder sister Van (84). Despite her

confidence, her father's negative perception of height is most felt by her. Since it is a major discussion topic in the family, Linny develops a desire to be taller during her adolescence. Unlike Van, she is good at hiding her insecurities. In this respect, their low social class and physical height outside the norm in connection with the US racial dynamics are the main components of Linny's feeling of "inadequacy" as a national abject. She assumes tallness in itself will offer her access to opportunities and resources they are being denied. Yet, "[w]hen Linny complained about wanting to be taller he [her father, Dinh] would reprimand her. "Not about being tall," he said. "It's about being just as equal as tall people" (61). His emphasis is on "to be *smarter*" (61). He continues, "If you not seen as equal you do whatever you can to make equalness happen" (61).

As previously mentioned, for the family, especially for her father, short height is a critical part of their racial identity, and Dinh Luong blames it for rendering them insufficient to reach economic resources and social privileges. In the face of his loss of authority and power in the family when his wife replaces him as the breadwinner, he underlines "[t]*his is a country of tall people*" (59). Despite his pressure on his daughters "to be smarter," the way he tries to overcome the disadvantages, embedded in the system, is focused on gaining sudden wealth. Instead of having a steady job, he devotes his time and energy to improve his tools and "believe[s] in the possibility of striking it rich and winning the lottery" (287). To put it otherwise, he believes in the element of luck in envisioning a better life for himself rather than moving through the dynamics the system offers. On the one hand, there is a rejection of the Asian model minority stereotype on his part. On the other hand, his victim mentality projects itself on Linny as an idea that "beauty equaled currency" (58).

As a result, Minh Nguyen writes, Linny "became, in the words of Mrs. Luong complaining on the phone to her friends, 'just like a white girl'" (170). During preadolescence, she starts to apply the makeup tips she gets from the magazines such as *Cosmo* and *Glamour*: "Linny put in long hours experimenting with shadows and liners, trying to make her eyes look bigger, deeper-set, less Asian. . . . She ran peroxide-soaked cotton balls through her hair to create caramel highlights" (58). It can be seen that even as a child, Linny's perception of beauty is shaped according to the Western beauty ideals.

Linny's Vietnamese body, as an aspect of her national abject Vietnamese identity, is outside the norm. Her self-conception is a representation of the act of abjection of the bodies that "do not matter." Considering the fact that they live in Michigan, it is no coincidence that she—and the family—are exposed to these standards, particularly regarding the body image. Also, the problem for the younger members of the Luong family is that the pressure of norms is the result of the parental attitudes that are shaped according to the stereotypes ascribed to them. Therefore, she engages in her abjection by trying to fix or ameliorate her body.

As a refugee family, the Luongs go through the emotionally and physically demanding phases of resettlement. They come to America through the Oortsemas family, who are affected by "a series of moving sermons about the plight of the Oriental boat people" and decide to sponsor a refugee family (128). Linny addresses the unpleasant reminiscences of her parents, especially her mother in those first years, how her mother "had often said she had tried to forget those first few months. Everything has seemed too sharp—the cold, the language, the confusion of all those aisles in the grocery store" (128). They start to live in a "little apartment, then in the ranch house in Wrightville" (Minh Nguyen 57).

In a way, the relationship between the Luongs and Oortsemas shows the generational differences. While the girls look at it from a pragmatic perspective and refuse to be identified with the "refugee gratitude," their parents, as Van observes, have "the habit of behaving in an overly deferential manner toward them" (142). "Or we still be in the camp," says Dinh Luong (142). Developing an inferiority complex, he has a strong desire to have the opportunities and resources reserved to the white. Therefore, the pressure of success runs within the family, enforced by him. On the girls' part, their exposure to Dinh Luong's beliefs and their societal condition as a refugee family greatly shape their way of thinking about their Vietnamese identity and the ways of meeting the dominant standards while struggling with the feelings of inadequacy in a white dominated state. Besides, there is this ontological owe to the Oortsemas, a feeling that even Linny cannot get rid of, although she is born in America. Thuy and Dinh Luong always remind the children of the Oortsemas' generosity for sponsoring them to America. "But I was born here," Linny always countered. "She didn't sponsor me." "It's the same," her mother had

insisted” (158). The way her family situates itself as indebted members of an abject history determines her abject consciousness.

Considering that the novel takes place in Michigan, it is not easy for the Luong family to escape the weight of whiteness, which shapes their self-conception as a Vietnamese refugee family. Like Van, Linny has an awareness of their low social class. Yet, her means to overcome this status differs from her elder sister’s. The pressure of achievement and assimilation on her in the way the society dictates, backfires. Besides her short height, what she inherits from her family is her beauty, which Van mentions. Beauty is “Linny’s distinguishing characteristic, and it satisfied people” (112). Linny has “smooth skin” and a “slim figure” (26). Therefore, Linny opts to shape her relationship with the US Americanness through her beauty.

In this regard, the Luongs whose self-conception is built on the national abjection by the wider American society, each member has a different way of dealing with the abject position. Linny’s response to being made abject occurs through her playing with gender-based abject stereotypes. Nevertheless, her move includes a disowning with her Vietnamese identity that she tries to suppress by assuming white girl habits. She tries to overcome her internal insecurity that seems to stem from her short height, defying and thus abjecting her Vietnamese way of life while she resists assimilating the way the American society dictates her.

Within this context, it is important to trace the dynamics that lead her to deem her Vietnamese identity as abject. The racial dynamics could first be seen in their interaction with the sponsor family, as the Oortsemas assume a paternalistic attitude towards them. It is important to emphasize that the Luongs are made to feel this superior position. For instance, when they meet Miles, Van’s fiancé, then Dirk Oortsema’s way of acknowledging the progress of the Luong family in building a life occurs through a sense of superiority as he tells Miles. Minh Nguyen writes, “‘We keep track of all our kids, all our families,’ Dirk has said proudly to Miles. ‘They’ve done good, every last one’” (142). Another example is Paula Oortsema’s deceitful attitude, apparent in her attempt to convince the girls for the Sunday school, saying “I just want what’s best for my girls”

(129). Her behavior exemplifies a kind of indoctrination, enforcing white supremacy as she assumes the role of white savior.

Furthermore, their guidance plays a role in the lives of the Luongs in other critical ways. When they are about to buy a house with Mrs. Luong's savings, Paula Oortsema affects her decision about the choice of neighborhood, showing the good schools in the area as an excuse. In "Creating a Sense of Place: The Vietnamese Americans and Little Saigon," Sanjoy Mazumdar et al. draw attention to the importance of the ethnic enclaves in heavily Vietnamese populated states. The formation of such settings leads the refugees "to create a sense of place to foster community identity and place attachment" in the host country. Therefore, establishing a life closer to these places can play a positive role not only in the integration of refugee families, but also for staying in touch with their cultural formations for the younger generation.

Yet, the messages Linny receives from her environment and the family cause her to live with self-doubt and constant aspiration for height. It starts in her childhood, as she confronts bullying due to her height: *How's the weather down there?—Do you want a booster seat?—Oops, I almost stepped on you!* (61). Nevertheless, when her father measured her height for the last time when she is seventeen and says "That's it for you," Mimi Nguyen describes Linny's feelings writing, "Linny had heard her share of lame short jokes . . . but that was the first time she felt sorrow, real hurt, at the fact of her height. She had wanted, at least, to be as tall as Van. Her father said, "It's not your fault. It's your family" (61). Although one cannot take the insults of her peers as a direct act of racial hostility, they have a strong adverse effect on her self-perception. Moreover, the moment she confronts the fact that she will stop growing taller than "four-eleven," her father's discouraging words cause a sort of inferiority complex that shows itself as self-assurance.

The complex affects her personality and shapes her relationship, especially with men. At that point, the racial dynamics intersect with racialized gender dynamics. Linny experiences it by abjecting aspects of her Vietnamese identity to distance herself from racial and race-based sexual stereotypes. In "Asian American Women's Body Image Experiences," Brady, et al. state that

Asian American women have a unique racialized experience that may contribute to higher body dissatisfaction. They are often exoticized, depicted as hypersexual and submissive sexual objects, and are targets of race-related-teasing that marginalizes and denigrates race-related features (e.g., eye size, skin tone). (480)

Contrary to Asian women stereotypes, such as the loyal and submissive oriental woman mentioned in the excerpt, Linny plays to the independent white girl stereotype with the agency she shows in her relationships. To overcome her insecurities related to her body image, she develops an extra care for her looks. Her friends are “always white, with politically progressive, hip parents” (151). It is also important to write that Linny usually chooses tall guys to date, mostly black or white. Comparing the dynamics of her family to her friends’ families, she is not happy in maintaining the Vietnamese way of life: “It embarrassed her to admit the mystery of her own family, the Asian stereotypes they kept reinforcing by saying so little to each other” (152). Thus, the discontent for her bodily features evolves into a contempt towards her Vietnamese roots and abjection of her Vietnamese identity.

The activity in Linny’s sexual life during her school years bothers Van who “told Linny she was on the verge of becoming a slut” (26). Although surprised, Linny replies with a feeling of pride for not being identified with the nerd stereotype: “Stung, Linny had lamely shot back that at least she wasn’t becoming a geek” (26). In other words, she prefers “the slut label”—a label usually associated with the white woman—over “geek.” Furthermore, to Van’s accusations, Linny blames her elder sister for not “understand[ing] “the power of holding a boy’s interest” (26). As Nguyen points out, “When Linny started acquiring boyfriends, she bragged to Van that she liked being short: she could make even the scrawniest guy feel tall and powerful” (62). Linny takes a sort of pride in her capacity to capture men’s attention. It seems that she tries to compensate for her low body esteem through her high sexual self-esteem and her influence over white men. While her family does not use the clothes the Oortsemas bring to them, she goes through them and selects some of them to enhance her appearance among her friends.

Mrs. Luong always smiled when she accepted the clothes, but later Linny would see them tossed into bags. Her parents weren’t quite willing to throw such things away, since that seemed wasteful, so they just stuffed them into

closets for years. Van refused to sift through the bags, but Linny dug through with a will, searching for anything that she thought her friends would like, or anything with a brand-name label. She made the clothes over into her own, enough so that even her parents forgot that they had ever belonged to anyone else. (129)

At a young age, she emulates white people in behavior and appearance. It also means that she constructs her inner self-worth on the basis of physical appearance. The precision she shows towards her clothing style can be conceived as an effort to make up for her abject Vietnamese body. Her insecurities remain permanent, however, as a grown-up woman. Years later, in a scene where she meets Van for their father's citizenship party, she warns Van about hemming her pants so that she could seem taller. For her, her obsession with how she looks is conditioned on her height. Minh Nguyen writes, "Linny depended on high heels. Without them she felt diminutive—a step away from being a little girl or a doddering old Asian woman" (136).

Her fragile self-conception, built on disowning the behavioral patterns of the white majority and family-imposed values, manifests itself more as she ages. Although she has no such plan of establishing a family and having kids, she feels the influence of societal norms that enforced these criteria that she also sees as "markers of a grown-up life" (97). Mimi Nguyen writes, "she couldn't help feeling somewhat exposed in lacking such markers of a grown-up life. At such moments Linny clung to Chicago as her prize, the gloss of sophistication that would cover her undistinguished career, lack of college degree, and nonexistent photo of husband and kids" (97). The point is her revolting spirit that she has especially towards the Vietnamese cultural values and pervasive stereotypes prevents her from connecting with herself and keeps Linny trapped in the self-abjection process.

Creating a life beyond the cultural expectations makes her more confident about standing against the cultural stereotypes. For instance, one of the promises she makes to herself is not "end[ing] up filing other women's nails for a living" (Minh Nguyen 57). When her friend apologizes to Linny for being mistaken once by one of her customers for the manicurist at her nail salon, she stays cool as she conveys to her friend, the owner of the

salon through her body language: “Linny waved a hand to indicate, *Don’t worry*. It was not the first time she’d been mistaken for the manicure girl” (56).

In this context, nail salons exemplify one of those abject spaces where the labor of Vietnamese women—Asian women in general—are exploited through long working hours with toxic chemicals. The confinement and dullness in those salons speak to the dynamics of national abjection. The Asian women working at these salons are conscious of the separation materialized in that space, while they have to reverse their entrapment into material income. In the scene where a family friend, the owner of a nail salon comes to their father’s citizenship party and invites Linny and Van to her salon, she remembers the feeling of stuckness she associates with those salons:

the very space of white on a woman’s French-tip manicure never failed to remind Linny of those striving, Lancôme-wearing Vietnamese women in Wrightville. Linny would shudder just driving past all those nail salons with orange adhesive letters spelling out signs on the window. *Nails by Kim*. *Nails by Hoang*. Or the worst, *Oriental Manicure*. Where bargain-conscious white women who stopped in to get their nails done always believed they were being gossiped about in Vietnamese. Where the same whiny soap opera music would blare from a boom box, the same Vietnamese magazines would cover the tables, and the same odor of nail polish remover and incense would linger in the air. (57)

Although keeping distance in these matters is easy, when it comes to emotional engagement, things get complicated. Her affair with Gary, the husband of one of her customers at *You Did It Dinners*, makes her ontological insecurities disguised as obsession with physical appearance to resurface. In the beginning, a relationship with Gary offers a life far from traditional roles as she finds “something irresistible in the idea of a married man. The ease, the allure. No chance of commitment” (12). Within time, she realizes her self-deception as an independent city woman while she finds herself questioning her own expectations about life.

The affair disrupts the secure world she builds for herself, as Linny confronts her inability to achieve the white standards. Their relationship illustrates the cumulative effect on Linny of being a child, raised in a refugee family. Her small apartment in Chicago is “filled with mismatched housewares from discount stores” (16). She does not want to

host Gary or anyone as she imagines it as “protective gear, outside of which her identity could be swayed, up for grabs” (16). It serves not only as a secure space she constructs for herself but also as a personal achievement. And yet, it is not easy for her to erase the traces of the social handicaps and psychological effects resulting from the low socioeconomic status of her family and the toxic environment she is exposed to due to her parents’ constant arguments. They prevent her from having a transparent communication with Gary as these dynamics related to her life and family make her somehow feel lesser: “He spoke of his middle-class background as if it forged a connection between them, when he had no idea how Linny had really grown up, first in that little apartment, then in the ranch house in Wrightville. The voices of her parents rising in argument while Linny and Van increased the volume of the television” (45).

The difference in cultural and family backgrounds also reminds Linny of the social status she aspires to yet fails to have through her beauty. Although she has no future plans with Gary, their lifestyle that symbolizes the standards Linny could never afford by herself, makes her envious of Pren, Gary’s wife. Pren works as a professional art advisor. Gary does not hesitate to appreciate his wife’s accomplishments in front of her: “Pren had scored with a Rauschenberg piece for her job; Pren had bought smartly for someone at a Sotheby’s auction. At home, Pren designed their new sunroom” (23). Her jealousy turns into a coping mechanism that she feels a sort of pride being Gary’s girlfriend: “The first time Linny took her clothes off for Gary, she realized: there was satisfaction in knowing he was married to a woman like Pren” (26). Apart from that sense of empowerment by being selected by a white man, Linny also enjoys the idea that she can compete against a beautiful, successful, white woman in emotional and bodily terms. However, she is innately aware of the class distinction between them as she “never could sustain a vision of her and Pren in the same room for long. Linny just didn’t belong in that sphere” (58).

Van and Linny’s lives are shaped by the standards set by the American nation that are internalized by their parents and shape their self-conceptions in a negative way. In her *Julia Kristeva*, Noëlle McAfee writes that, “[a]bjection begins in early childhood and it continues throughout one’s life. What is abject is never excluded once and for all; it remains on the periphery of consciousness, haunting the ever-tenuous borders of

selfhood” (129). Unlike her sister Van, who feels “chosen” by her husband, Linny selects the guys she will be dating. The agency she thinks she asserts in directing her life gives her an empowered feeling towards the majority that imposes white standards. Nevertheless, she cannot get rid of her inferiority complex due to her short height, and all the implications of her abject Vietnamese roots create. Due to her negative self-image, Linny feels threatened by any “beautiful” woman. For instance, when she sees her brother-in-law’s—Miles’s—mistress at a restaurant, Linny again experiences the unease coming with their refugee abject status:

“This is Grace,” Miles said, and the woman smiled. She and Linny sized each other up for a moment and it only took that second for Linny to know: Chinese girl, second-or third-generation, from an upper-middle-class family. Dark jeans, cashmere sweater under a short jacket, a named handbag. Her lipstick was glossy and her eye shadow held a hint of shimmer. She was thin and angular, nearly as tall as Miles, the kind of girl who could wear a shapeless tunic and look good in it. Linny envied those rare tall Asian girls, though she never admitted it out loud. Sometimes, catching her reflection in a dressing room mirror, Linny remembered the pencil marks in her parents’ house and felt indignation, even shock, at the unchangeable fact of her height: she should have been a tall girl. (68)

Height stands for the opportunities, resources, a class that they do not have access to, or even if they do, just like Van does, they cannot develop a feeling of belonging. In this vein, Grace, as a part of the multigenerational family in the US, corresponds to a status with privileges and influence that they can never match up to. As Linny thinks, “Grace. Of course, her name was Grace. Such a standard later-generation name. Girls named Grace were bright and ambitious, bought makeup at Clinique and suits at J. Crew. They were the kind of girls Van probably always wanted to be” (99).

Moreover, the fear of being associated with the Asian female stereotypes and body dissatisfaction persistently haunts her. For instance, when they are sitting at a restaurant with Gary, she is concerned about being seen as “the age-old-stereotype, Asian mistress to a white guy. *Typical*, she imagined one whispering to the other. *Fucking Twinkie*” (24). Kumiko Nemoto explains it by stating that: “Interracial relationships between Asian American women and white American men have been shaped by colonial/postcolonial U.S.–Asian relations and racism in the United States” (27). When Gary tells her that Pren

decides to have another child, and yet, they will continue seeing each other, Linny experiences a kind of recognition that she would never take the place of Pren. At their last meeting after her visit to Michigan, Linny feels a mixture of humiliation and shame, which also brings her a realization about her agency and how her active role in directing her life has evolved into passivity, leaving her in self-contradiction:

For that was how things always ended for her: with a wince. That inward shiver, the desire to erase all evidence of where she'd been and with whom. Linny had always relied on that wince to keep her moving on, make sure she didn't become the needy, guy-directed girl that she had sometimes suspected her sister of being. Linny left guys before they could leave her, letting that pride her mother had said she had too much of propel her forward (210).

Regardless of her efforts to break free from family and societal expectations, Linny realizes that she is turning into those stereotypes that she flees from. The scene where she is reprimanded by her employer, Barbara, when Pren calls her upon finding out the affair is also important in terms of displaying her "shifting relation to Americanness" as a national abject. The feeling reminds her of a similar confusion she has when the teachers call her back in school to warn her: "as if expecting her to wake up one morning and be the good model minority her sister was, but Linny refused to follow through" (212). She questions herself again, being upset of turning into the expectations she escapes: "*Was I an ideal employee?* Had Barbara viewed Linny the way people usually viewed Van?" (213) Furthermore, Pren's approach to Linny when she finds out the affair also bothers her: "I hope you don't think you're special. In fact, I'm glad I ran into you, because you should know that you're just another notch on his fetish belt. He's got a thing for you ethnic girls. Thai massage. All that stuff. Didn't you know?" (241). Although Linny occasionally plays to these stereotypes, the idea that Gary, the man for whom she has a strong feeling, views her through those stereotypical abject images, hurts her.

After this confrontation, Linny drives to Ann Arbor to her sister's home. Van's fragile emotional status due to her divorce process brings them close to each other. During her increasing visits to her father's house to take him to the TV show to exhibit his invention, Linny starts to date Tom, a Vietnamese childhood friend from the neighborhood. After all these years, she finds an affinity with Tom because she realizes she needs no effort to explain herself as they share most of the socioemotional difficulties as Vietnamese

children. As she discovers other similarities in concerns and values, it brings them closer to each other, and she finds herself not forcing herself to do “the flirtations she’d exerted with every other guy” (170).

Reconnection with her sister helps her to remember the importance of relying on her strength and skills as a Vietnamese. Linny defines success over physical beauty, having the attributes reinforced by society as the ideal. She thinks that her being short—an attribute due to her Vietnamese genetics—is the root of all her problems, thus she abjects-defies everything related to her Vietnamese identity. Dissociating herself from the Vietnamese cultural norms led her to construct her position on Americanness to an extent. Nevertheless, what she really suffers from is the consequences of the structural racism and discrimination that she inherits from her family. At the end, getting away from herself creates a distance towards the skills, and “the bad daughter” label is somehow her comfort space.

After her realization that her defiance indirectly positions Linny closer to those stereotypes she escapes, she recognizes that: “Linny had grown up—though not as up as she had hoped and assumed. She remained, and Van too, the short girls their father had told them they would always be” (292). This self-acceptance redefines her relationship with her abject status, McAfee describes as “remaining on the periphery of consciousness” (48). Rejecting the promotion Barbara offers in the diner, Linny decides to go after her passion in the kitchen, a trait she inherits from her mother. Starting a culinary school to turn her skill into a career as a professional chef, Linny dreams of opening *The Short Girl Café*. In the end, Linny’s reunion with her family and opening *The Short Girl Café* show her embracing the abjection. In doing so, she becomes a “subject-in process,” to use Kristeva’s phrasing, which positions her in a progressive status. On the other hand, Van’s acceptance of divorce and moving into a new house is a step toward in relying on one’s power to move through the forces of national and personal abjection.

1.4. CONCLUSION

Chih-Chieh Chou states that the concept of model minority separates Asian Americans from white people. As he maintains, the model minority image “assumes an ‘American’ norm that Asian Americans can never achieve because they are culturally marked as being ‘different’ (222). Bich Minh Nguyen’s novel, set in Michigan, depicts the responses of the Vietnamese refugee family members against the national abject subject positions. It is important to remember that the US government is responsible for the displacement of South Vietnamese people through its so-called humanitarian action.

In *Short Girls*, the refugee family experiences the consequences of the Vietnam War and its aftermath in their own way. Examining the effects of national abjection through Vietnamese refugees’ problematic relation to their bodies shows one of the many effects of national abjection. The members of the Luong family develop a deeply negative self-concept that leads them to seek external validation in their social lives. Apart from the low male employment rate within the capitalist labor market, Dinh Luong refuses to participate in the low-wage labor market as a regular employee. His rejection of the naturalization process also signifies his psychological resistance to coming to terms with his refugee status. Dinh is emasculated in social and familial terms in the resettlement. His efforts to turn his alienation into material wealth by designing props for short people show Dinh’s ability to make choices and decisions in contrast to the victimized refugee stereotype. Critically, though, his broken English at the TV show where he lays his hopes to strike a lead, illustrates that overcoming systematic barriers cannot be reduced to individual effort. Dinh Luong is the embodiment of national abjection with his citizenship only on paper that does not allow for a social and cultural inclusion.

As younger members of the family, Van and Linny’s struggle with the Vietnamese American identity mostly occurs through their dissatisfaction with their physical appearances. They internalize their father’s feelings of inferiority on the basis of their low stature and engage in self-abjection as Vietnamese American women. Van and Linny’s different lifestyles indicate the varying responses of the younger generation to the social and cultural pressures. Nevertheless, their desire for wealth and status lead both sisters to

put themselves into abject positions especially in their relationship with the opposite sex. Van tries to stay in a loveless marriage while Linny gets involved in a dysfunctional affair. It is part of their effort to compensate for their being nonwhite. Their recognition that one can gain belonging by embracing their culture and bodies with confidence and decision to work on their strengths together offer an optimistic portrayal for future generations. As Chapter Two argues, the attitude of the first-generation Vietnamese families is a critical determinant of the identity formation of the younger generation.



CHAPTER 2

SURVIVAL AT ALL COSTS?: *THE REEDUCATION OF CHERRY* TRUONG

The Reeducation of Cherry Truong is Vietnamese American writer Aimee Phan's 2012 debut novel. She is a native of Orange County, known as Little Saigon in the US. As one of the diasporic Vietnamese literary voices of today, Phan has thus far contributed to the Vietnamese American canon with her short story collection *We Should Never Meet: Stories* (2005). In addition, discussing the legacy and the aftermath of the Vietnam War, her essays have been published in notable newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. In her interview with famous Vietnamese writers Viet Thanh Nguyen and Andrew Lam, Phan states that the collective works by female Vietnamese artists inspire her and affect her writing process in "unpredictable and rejuvenating ways" ("New Voices" 32).

Written from a multi-perspectival lens, the novel features the voices of women who tell their memories related to the remnants of war, resettlement, survival, and reconciliation intricately. Connoting an ongoing process, the title, *The Reeducation* refers not only to the reeducation camps established by the Communist government in South Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, but also to the protagonist Cherry's struggle to resolve the complexities of her transnational family that besets her nuclear and extended family. Long T. Bui notes, "the term 'reeducation' suggests that refugee memorywork never simply takes the form of nostalgia or denial of the past but a constant negotiation of history as interpreted through past wrongs and obligations" (73). Throughout the novel, in which each chapter begins with a letter from the past, the reader witnesses the attempts of the family members to reckon with their past deeds and their failures to leave them behind.

The novel mainly revolves around two families, the Truongs and the Vos, who become a part of the Vietnamese diaspora after the war. These two families are in conflict because Cherry's paternal grandfather failed to keep his promise to arrange seats for his co-in-laws while fleeing from the war. Although they were destined to live in France with

Cherry's paternal grandparents, Tuyet, Cherry's mother, convinces her husband Sanh to move to America and bring her remaining family members. Having no idea about the reasons for her family's rift, Cherry heads out for Vietnam to bring her brother, Lum, back to America. Lum is sent to a reverse exile in Vietnam by his family after Cherry is injured in an accidental shooting during his fight with a gambling gang. After her first journey to Vietnam, Cherry starts to trace the secrets of her extended family there, in the US, and in France. In doing so, she exposes deliberately erased and forgotten memories related to her family history as a second-generation Vietnamese American. Therefore, instead of offering a usual narrative of flight and survival, Phan traces historical, political, and cultural forces in relation to the Vietnam War and its lasting effects on family dynamics.

In this exploration, the (in)voluntary return of the younger generation to Vietnam, their place of origin, plays a significant role in discussing the present issues of the Vietnamese family. Moreover, it also helps the younger generation make sense of their ethnic and racial identity. After the atrocities of war, departing from Vietnam is not an easy matter for the first-generation Vietnamese. Return is not an easy call, either. In her narrative, Phan also draws attention to the transitional process of refugee resettlement, making room for the refugee camp experience. Apart from racial and economic barriers they face in the host countries as they try to adapt and survive, personal and national histories constitute a big challenge, particularly for the first-generation. The complex policies of the sovereign states and personal choices made under tough circumstances also make it hard for the first generation to reconcile with the past. Furthermore, silence becomes central to refugee lives and creates a rift in their communication with the younger generation.

Writing on the conditional exclusion and inclusion practices and political processes of Asian Americans in American history, Shimakawa stresses how the relationship of Asian Americans with the wider American society is based on "the poles of abject visibility/stereotype/foreigner and invisibility/assimilation (to whiteness)" (160). In this regard, the incorporation of the Vietnamese into American society, is based on rescue and victim narratives. Despite their mental and territorial displacement from Vietnam and the

so-called humanitarian interventions, the history of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people are primarily associated with the abject in the Western imagination.

Similarly, situated at the periphery of Western nations, the Vietnamese refugees, as portrayed in Phan's novel, experience national abjection and racial discrimination in various contexts in their psychological and sociocultural adjustment processes. They have to go through many forms of difficulties, starting from the refugee camps, including financial hardships, psychological distress, and intergenerational conflict. Yet, questioning the abject history is important for the younger generation to negotiate the results of these decisions and false promises by the international regimes on their personal lives and identities. As Lisa Lowe puts it,

Asian American culture 're-members' the past in and through the fragmentation, loss, and dispersal that constitutes that past. Asian American culture is the site of more than critical negation of the U.S. nation; it is a site that shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state. (29)

One of the reasons for the miscommunication and conflict in refugee households is the pressure of involuntary past decisions and internalization of abjection by the Vietnamese themselves. Their lives still carry the consequences of unresolved issues intertwined with historical circumstances. Untold truths and secrets in war and migration "create ruptures in the family narrative that can never be wholly contained by an artificial peace in the refugee home" (Vo Dang 187). Thus, family relations in refugee families are vulnerable and marked by "a fragile truce with lingering suspicion and unresolved hurts, and that threatens to unravel at the slightest provocation" (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 155). Cherry's temporal and spatial estrangement from the Vietnam War and family history as a second generation predisposes her to reconnect with her ancestral land and search for ways to repair the generational and territorial distance to the intentionally obscured past.

This chapter argues that the challenges and responsibilities of the Vietnamese diaspora showcase the perspective of the refugee woman, as they are burdened by heavier emotional and material responsibilities of their abject position during the displacement.

They are most affected by the negative consequences of the war, while they also play a critical role in rebuilding and reestablishing a life in diaspora. Their status as already racial and national objects is combined with their precarious situation at the object spaces of the refugee camps. However, they develop different forms of resistance and strategies to survive for themselves and their children. Their abjection in multiple forms and levels does not lead them to turn into victim stereotypes, but rather into fighters despite the hardships, tradition, and political discourses caused. When it comes to the younger generation Vietnamese, epitomized by Cherry, their lives and mindsets turn out to be very different from the expectations of their parents. The conflict with the family values and independent mindset lead to a good thing, as Cherry recognizes her object foreignness to Vietnam. In the face of politically imposed subject formations and culturally demanding responsibilities, the younger generation prefers resisting by questioning and uncovering the unaddressed national policies and familial issues.

2.1. THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEE WOMAN AS RACIAL AND SEXUAL OBJECT

The refugee camps are the first stop for Vietnamese people fleeing the war on their way to the host countries. Leaving Vietnam, their cultural and national home for the “ideal,” the Truong family travels to France, hoping for a secure, physical unit that they could “inhabit” together with their “family, people, things and belongings” (Mallett 63). In this sense, the Pulau refugee camp in Bidong Island, Malaysia, is one of the biggest overseas refugee camps that turned into temporary dwellings for the Southeast refugees waiting to be sponsored during their prolonged stay in the late 1970s.²¹

In a scene where they depart from the camp, Xuan is depicted crying in his mother’s arms while Hung, the patriarch of the Vos family, blithely states, “Foolish boy . . . Doesn’t he know he’s finally going home?” (Phan 51). These two scenes signify not only the poor material conditions but also the immaterial complexities of displacement in general while exposing the gendered precarious conditions for the female refugees. In this regard, the

²¹ When the number of refugees exceeded the estimated number and the Western countries preserved their privilege to hold the criteria in accepting refugees, the precipitous exodus of the Southern Asians caused chaos for the first asylum countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong (Chan 78).

refugee camps “go beyond mere transient sites of refuge or mere touristic destinations” (Tran Nguyen 89). In a later scene, Trinh says to her son, Xuan, “Don’t you realize I can only talk to you? Only you can understand. You were there” for a second time, determined to talk about her sexual assault at the refugee camp on Bidong Island in the presence of her then little son (Phan 156). Trinh’s effort to communicate with Xuan displays the remnants of violence, the war, and the displacement they generate on a woman’s body. Her emphatic insistence on discussing the event reveals the endurance and resilience the refugee woman has to exert to protect their loved ones.

Returning to the promise of studying refugee processes through a critical refugee studies perspective, it is important to discuss the camps which, as Isin and Rygiel put it “transform the status of those ‘caught’ from subjects to objects” (198). The discussions about the refugee camps usually center around Giorgio Agamben’s well-known theories on the workings of modern sovereignty. His concepts such as “bare life,” “state of exception,” and “zones of distinction” are used by refugee critics to characterize the disempowerment and lack of control of the refugee subject. Nonetheless, recent scholarship emphasizes the capacity of the refugee subject to exercise their agenc(ies) in different ways as opposed to their representation as “bare” beings.²²

In his “What Is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp” Simon Turner writes that life at refugee camps cannot be reduced to “bare life in an Agambenian sense” while acknowledging its “exceptional” nature due to its distinctive temporal and spatial conditions (Turner 139). Such treatment would contribute to the stereotypical dehumanization discourses around the refugee condition and disdain the efforts and resilience of the displaced people who risk all the potential pain and injuries for a more decent life. It is an indisputable fact that in the camp(s), “the existing juridico-political logic is suspended” (Isin and Rygiel 183). Refugees, disqualified from their political rights as citizens during their temporary stay at the camps, are under “the

²² For Espiritu, Agamben’s treatment of the camp “as a unified and monolithic type of space” disregards the fact that different types of camps are governed by “different logics and daily material practices” (76). She states, “Agamben’s “camp” is thus a more apt descriptor of detention centers and closed camps, in which protracted refugees become constituted as “no longer human,” than of refugee processing centers and open camps, in which refugees are converted into modern human beings bound for the modern West” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 76).

protection of UNHCR and are subjected to international regimes of care” (Turner 144). However, the ambiguity regarding their spatial and temporal transitions confines them into a space and state of “existential, social, political, and legal limbo” where they are “prevented from exercising their political subjectivity” (Isin and Rygiel 189). As Turner claims, “[t]hey are provided with shelter, food and health treatment but they are expected not to make political demands” (143).

In this respect, the refugee policies at the time indicate the failure of politics in managing the displaced people from war-torn Vietnam, as opposed to Western nations’ humanitarian rhetoric. The refugees, fleeing from social, political, and economic conflict and persecution in their countries of origin thus have to act in compliance to make a transition to their resettlement countries as soon as possible. As the logic of refugee camps is based on readapting the residents to new conditions of life upon their arrival, these places are spaces of a new subject formation with their spatial and temporal liminality considering the special logic of law and living by which the inhabitants are governed.

The circumstances and management in the camp space vary greatly, depending on the number of people the refugee camps host (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 57). Pulau Bidong is one of the two destinations with Pulau Galang in Southeast Asia that were hastily organized to receive the refugee flow in the late 1970s. (Tran 80). After the communist takeover, the Vos family—Cherry’s family on father’s side—due to their relatively better social class manages to flee the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in search for a safe refuge for themselves. The refugee camp at the Pulau Bidong, Malaysia is their first stopover before France, their country of destination. From the adults’ perspective, and particularly the women’s, the physical and living conditions of the camp are not pleasant as Hoa, Cherry’s paternal grandmother mentions: “The Malaysians treated the refugees worse than their dogs” (Phan 26).

Being dispersed across the Island, the Truong extended family lives in different zones such as Zone E, Zone B, since “[o]nly the immediate family could live together in the camp” (Phan 29). Although the flexibility of the refugee processing camp allows a mobile life on the island compared to detention centers, “camps have boundaries” (Turner 139). In this sense, a certain feeling of confinement and absence of choice is a reality for the

Vos family, who experience another dispersal within the inner structures of the camp. As Phan writes, although they may ask for a transfer, “[r]efugees preferred to stand in line for their immigration requests” (Phan 29).

Furthermore, the feeling of confinement is obvious in the physical confined spaces they are assigned to live in. Hoa and Hung’s tent is relatively small and shaky with “a four-meter-long thatched roof supported by water-rotten wooden stakes, too small of a space for Hung to properly stalk around” (Phan 26). The growing number of “boat people” contributes to the deteriorating living conditions as Hoa compares them: “The new arrivals in Zone C had it worse—plastic blue tarp shelters barely supported by skinny tree branches” (26).

With their distinctive spatial and temporal dimensions, the camp places feature “a different reality” where “social life, power relations, hierarchies and sociality are remolded in” (Turner 144). In other words, people flee the devastation and loss at home with the hope for new beginnings, including establishing a sense of connection to the place they are destined to. In *The Reeducation*, the spatially ruptured social fabric with the displacement is reestablished in the temporal space of the camp with the rebuilt social and community structures such as restaurants and temples. As Phan writes, “[s]till, some of the neighbors accepted this as their new home, so desperate to resettle in any place that wasn’t Vietnam. They opened hair salons and noodle shops within the township and joined church choirs. Even when paperwork cleared for immigration, some felt reluctant to leave” (Phan 28).

Just as the conditions of the camp differ, the experience of camp life also differs. Hoa thinks, in different locations and inhabited by different residents, particularly for the female: “[t]his isn’t a home” she pressures her husband for leaving the camp (Phan 29). Hoa’s refusal to accept it as home implies the complexities of the female refugee who is stuck with the precarious conditions of the camp. Her unease and feeling of not belonging is best seen in the scene where she struggles with getting dressed after the shower, feeling the stare of an elderly refugee man, pretending to be asleep in this shanty. The scene is important in exposing the tangled ways of the exceptional circumstances of the Vietnam

War and cultural assumptions of the patriarchy that entrap the displaced women in transit. They have to deal with the lack of privacy resulting from the suspension of laws in refugee camps and silence as a cultural and political force: “Back in Vietnam, she’d tell her husband. No, she realized. In Vietnam, this wouldn’t happen. They had walls back home” (Phan 26).

Amy R. Friedman mentions “the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees designated women a ‘particularly vulnerable segment’ of the refugee population” because of their gender in 1980 (66). The refugee camps, intended to be a protective space for people on the move “expecting to find safety,” are places where the refugee woman is inflicted with various sexual and gender-based assaults (Friedman 68). With the bureaucratic violence they experience as a community, it is seen that the refugee mothers endure sexual precarity to protect their families and children and make a transition to their new lives.

Thus, for the female refugee, the transient nature of camp space constitutes a vulnerable status. Even worse, the incidence of rape as a consequence of inefficient laws and inadequate precautions has a long-lasting negative impact not only on the sanity of the assaulted person, but also on their social and family relationships. Within this context, Trinh’s case offers a fair example of the gendered nature of displacement and the weight of traditional gender roles on the part of Vietnamese refugee woman. Trinh, one of Cherry’s aunts on her father’s side, stays in the camps with her son Xuan and parents in law, Hung and Hoa, while her husband Yen, who is a lawyer in France is granted refugee status there with the ending of the war, waits for their processes to be completed. In her tent, she is subjected to constant rape by the guards, which sometimes evolves into mass rape. In this regard, she is exposed to double abjection, first as a Vietnamese refugee who has to stay in the abject space of refugee camp to begin a new life and second as a Vietnamese refugee woman who has to deal with the traumatizing effects of the sexual assault she faces in the camp. Trinh’s case is important in displaying the embodied effects of the refugee camps on the members of a national abject population that was presented as “objects of rescue” in need of liberal intervention.

Simon Turner mentions an “indeterminate temporariness” intrinsic to the “exceptional” and ambiguous nature of the camps (142). Therefore, the institutionalization of daily life through some communal structures is “out of necessity” to achieve a certain quality of life in the face of an indeterminate period of stay (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 74). On the other hand, the limbo state, in the spatial and temporal sense, indicates a kind of “passive” status for the refugees as they are denied legal claims against the violation of their rights. An overly optimistic reading of life in the camp space will be oversimplifying and ignoring the injustices that underlie many traumas affecting the first and subsequent generations of Vietnamese today. Although the spatial temporariness marks a new beginning for the people in certain cases, it also indicates a space of harm and transgression with lingering trauma afterward as well as with no legal implications for the sex offender.

In their examination of the refugees in abject spaces, Paul Moawad and Lauren Andres write that the refugees “find themselves in a situation of deep uncertainty, enduring collective anxiety due to ‘political waiting’, which is a consequence of external geopolitical forces” (468-469).²³ In the same vein, Espiritu states, “refugee camps in Southeast Asia [are] the very site of the construction of Vietnamese as ‘passive, immobilized, and pathetic’” (*Body Counts* 21). Hence, the Truong family in the camp space are abjects due to their state of limbo in the temporal bordering of the camp. Their abjection is intricately linked to the benevolence of the Western nations that impose “waiting” as an instrument of political power. In other words, their national abject status in Western imagination is reinforced by holding them “waiting” in the spatially abject area of the camp space that exposes the refugee woman to bodily abjection. They feel unprotected, yet keep their hopes high for the future.

Yên Lê Espiritu discusses how the resettlement process for the Vietnamese refugees points to a “stringent process that prolonged the refugees’ stay in the first asylum countries” as opposed to its representation as a “benevolent and generous system” by the

²³ In “Refugees in Abject Spaces, Protracted ‘Waiting’ and Spatialities of Abjection During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Paul Moawad and Lauren Andres examine the concept of abject space focusing on the refugees who are on a protracted condition, in the position of “political waiting.” Their discussion, however, is useful in reading the Vietnamese refugees in this context as they were also subjected to indeterminate waiting process during their transit.

Western media and authorities (*Body Counts* 51). In the mid-1970s, the number of displaced Vietnamese increased with the withdrawal of the US military from Vietnam. In the face of the refugee flow, the Western countries announced that they could not keep up with the pace of the resettlement demand of the refugee populations. The situation led the first asylum countries, including Malaysia, to take responsibility for the large refugee flocks with no promise of a solution.²⁴ Espiritu sums up the situation in these words, “As the number of arrivals grew and resettlement offers slowed, local hostility escalated. When more than 54,000 arrived in June 1979 alone, boat ‘pushbacks’ became routine” (52).

In 1979, with the Geneva conference on “refugees and displaced persons in Southeast Asia,” the Western nations and ASEAN countries came to an agreement based on the promise of accelerating the rate of resettlement and raising quotas by the Western countries and providing temporary asylum by the ASEAN countries (53). The migration of the Truong family as part of the second wave of refugees coincides with this era as they had to stay in Pulau Bidong, one of the overcrowded refugee camps at the time. One major drawback of the agreement on the part of the ASEAN countries is “the right to manage the admission of the refugees—that is, the right to control their borders from afar by denying admission of the unwanted” (53). In short, the camp space of the first asylum countries that deal with the huge refugee accommodation problem becomes a ground where the refugee subject is processed for the safety of Western nations. It signifies the superior positioning of the Western countries superior to Asian countries with a better exercise of their sovereignty rights:

The international division of the task of refugee resettlement thus replicated the power hierarchy between the “Third” and “First” worlds, as the poorer Southeast Asian countries assumed the role of a “surrogate refuge”—performing the civilizing work of “sanitizing” the cultures, languages, and bodies of the Vietnamese objects of rescue—for the sole benefit of Western resettlement countries. (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 53)

The process corresponds to “jettison[ing] that which is deemed objectionable,” that is needed by the Western nations to form a “purified” national state because abjection points

²⁴ The five-member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—served as first asylum countries for the refugees.

to “a process that negotiates the limits in the formation of the subject [nation, in this case] through the rejection of unwanted things” (Arya 48). It also illustrates how the national abjection process started even before the refugee reception. After all, the refugees were considered “the discards of U.S. war in Vietnam” while they were posited as an “unwanted” population (32). Returning to the conceptualization of the camp as an abject space, Moawad and Andres point to the theorization of dirt and contamination regarding the spatial nature of abjection. In her discussion of dirt and pollution, Kristeva draws on Mary Douglas, who states that “dirt is matter out of place” (44). Thus, it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection” Kristeva argues, “but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (*Powers of Horror* 4). At this point, “rejection is caused by an innate human desire for order” (Duschinsky 710). The refugees, as “unwanted” populations and their “in-between” status, are perceived to be a threat to the national order in the Western countries. In other words, “[t]here is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” (Douglas 2). Therefore, the enforcement of the boundaries constituted to keep the refugees outside or in line is rather about a strategy to avoid dealing with the abject refugee during their transition. The process of holding them in the camps for indeterminate periods of stay is an enforcement of “their abjection and hence on-purpose exclusion” (Moawad and Andres 471).

This aversion to the hardships of refugees linked with these nationally and politically constructed hierarchies and categorizations also contributes to the precariousness of the refugee woman in the camp space. Returning to Trinh’s case in the novel, it can be stated that on Trinh’s part, becoming abject is experienced through a “hybrid of two forms of abjection” which is put forth by Diken and Laustsen “as pollution or contamination” as its primary form and “sin” and “shame” as its secondary form (119). Trinh, a rape victim, initially feels as “as an abject, as a ‘dirty’, morally inferior person” since “[t]he penetration inflicts on her body and her self a mark, a stigma, which cannot be effaced” (Diken and Laustsen 113). In this sense, the physical, the psychological effects of her sexual abuse continue after their reunion with her husband since “the trauma of rape may, for some, be even worse than bodily harm” (Diken and Laustsen 113). Her emotional and psychological responses in the aftermath of resettlement struggles with a feeling of mental

contamination that is accompanied by guilt and shame due to her abuse-related trauma as she avoids physical and emotional intimacy with her husband Yen. In Trinh's case, the impacts of rape at the camp space go beyond her damaged bodily and psychic integrity and affects her relationship with her son, husband and members of the extended family. As she herself states, Trinh feels "broken" in the face of her psychic and bodily transgression (Phan 103). She feels abject in a bodily sense and it has a negative influence on their marital intimacy.

Unable to articulate her emotional distress and assault for fear of social abjection, Trinh develops anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder that severely affects her life in France. Instead of seeking professional psychological help, she first resorts to Catholicism to regain her "bodily and spiritual purity" that she thinks to be lost as a result of her bodily abjection (Diken and Laustsen 116). Becoming an eager attendee of the church and exhibiting fervent devotion during the prayers, she tries to overcome her inflicted trauma through piety. In other words, religion becomes a medium for Trinh to express her inner disturbance and sustain her belief to regain her mental stability.

Hearing about the miraculous healings through ritual baths of the Sacred Virgin Mary sanctuary at the Lourdes, Trinh, believing to "be saved" there with the water, asks Yen to take her to the place (103). Trinh's motivation to go to the sanctuary stems from her psychological need to fix her violated physical and mental integrity—as well as getting rid of "sin"—so that she can recover and reclaim her self-esteem. During their visit, she confides in Emilie, one of their sponsor family members: "I've come here to heal myself, so the Holy Mary can give me my virginity and I can be whole again" (Phan 103). Reposing her hope in the virgin Mary and the holy water of the Lourdes to cleanse her soul and body from the taint of the aggressor, Trinh, as the abject fills lots of water bottles even to carry them back home. However, Trinh goes through a nervous breakdown when she loses Xuan at the sanctuary where they go together to fill their bottles with holy water.

Her abject feeling in a bodily sense is also intricately related to its communal aspect. However, her abject status in a general sense is directly related to their being national abjects for not being a Westerner. To her bodily abjection, national abjection is added.

Though they recognize the change in her attitude after they come to France, the family members do not take Trinh's neurotic manners seriously. As Khatharya Um underlines, "[s]traddling the interstice between the need to speak and the inability to express, silence is, for many refugees, a self-imposed and an externally compelled strategy of survival" (842). In this particular case, silence in the camp space and in the initial phases of the resettlement is a strategy for Trinh to survive and protect her family, especially her son Xuan. Her perseverance against the bodily assault can be interpreted as an aspect of female refugee identity who with her role as mother has to struggle with the mental and physical challenges mostly by herself to make a transition to their new lives. Moreover, her feelings of shame and guilt that prevent her from revealing her abuse and healing are related to lack of legal protection in the transition period.

Nevertheless, the feeling of loss triggers her traumatic memories and leads her to confront with her mother-in-law. In a state of extreme desperation after losing sight of her son, Trinh remembers how defenseless she was once against the humiliation and assault of the guards at the camps. She hysterically asks Hoa: "Why did you all leave me?" (108) . . . "Every night with those men" (Phan 109). At that moment, her revelation to her mother-in-law what she has gone through is a breakaway from not only the cultural values but also the political mechanisms that dictate her to stay silent and conform.

Trinh breaks her silence and demands to talk, which is another form of expressing agency against the traditional and ideological forces that ignore her struggle in the face of disrespect and abuse. For instance, Trinh's first reaction after she regains consciousness is to warn Hoa against telling her husband about the rape, while she threatens to kill herself. Trinh's first voicing her rape corporates an identification with guilt that she cannot resist but she has to verbalize at some point to alleviate her emotional pain. However, her internalization of "shame" thwarts her from exposing her sexual assault to the extended family. As Diken and Laustsen critically note, "[s]hame is produced through an act in which the subject works as the agent of its own desubjectivation, its own oblivion as a subject" (121). Trinh has to remain silent and let the guards sexually harass her to make her way out of the camp. Her lingering feelings of guilt and shame result in trauma because "unlike sin, shame resists verbalization" (Diken and Laustsen 121). Considering

the traditional structure of Asian societies, her feelings are understandable since people can blame Trinh for not resisting it and tarnishing the family.

When Trinh's response to the emotional injury sometimes turns into extreme symptoms such as panic attacks, and she gets hospitalized at one point, she no longer prefers silence. Although she internalizes her traumatic assault through silence for a period of time, it takes its toll on her mental health and takes her to a phase that she no longer prefers to stay silent. Ruth Wajnryb states that:

Silence is as complex as spoken language, as differentiated and as subtle. Sometimes it is self-imposed, sometimes, other-imposed. Sometimes it is driven by the urge to protect or salvage or cherish; other times, as a weapon of defence or control or denial. One thing that underscores all instances: it is rarely unproblematic. (30)

Breaking her silence and insisting on talking about the issues that are left unspoken constitute not only a challenge to her marginalization as a national abject but also an act of denouncing the national and patriarchal oppressions as a sexually abject woman refugee. The subsequent processes signify Trinh's agency as a Vietnamese refugee woman who rejects silence to claim her voice and subvert her victimization. In "Confronting the Power of Abjection: Toward a Politics of Shame," Jennifer Purvis argues that a reflection upon shame and disgust as accompanying feelings of abjection can pave the way for liberatory politics and political action (50). She writes, "I propose that in cases where the shamed subject is not annihilated by shame, shame can be revalued as meaningful and political. We can learn from and create from shame" (Purvis 47). However, positing the revelation of shame as an empowering force does not come to mean "shame is desired, but that examining shame as an expression of power reveals insight into how it operates and how best to respond to its negative and potentially devastating effects" (48).

Trinh voices her abuse at the camp and attempts to communicate with her son to confront and resolve her bodily abjection at the camp. It shows Trinh's potential as the Vietnamese female refugee abject to transform shame into a critical source of questioning politically inflicted abjection and shame. Moreover, her effort to communicate her trauma is an

attempt to overcome her posttraumatic and socially inflicted and internalized feelings of shame and guilt “since the workings of shame and disgust, like the workings of power, are inside us, perpetuated by us, constitutive of us” (Purvis 59).

A deeper look reveals that Trinh also resists through the very same dynamics that align her to a “state of inexistence” in the camp space. As Isin and Rygiel argue, “abject spaces also expose and render visible and audible various strategies and technologies of otherness that attempt to produce such states of inexistence. The exposure of this logic becomes a significant act of resistance” (Isin and Rygiel 198). When one of the guards insinuates one night that his friend can sexually abuse her child, Trinh takes a firm stand against it, threatening to disclose the potential abuse: “Do whatever you want with me . . . If you touch him, I will tell anyone who will listen what you’ve done to him and they will slit your throats” (Phan 158). Using the internal logic at the camp space, Trinh prevents the risk of abuse for her son and thus exhibits a personal agency against the dehumanizing oppressions even if it includes her bodily sacrifice: “A woman crying rape, the camp officers would have blamed her—certainly she had seduced them—and said that she deserved it. But the guards couldn’t claim the same about a small boy” (Phan 158).

Therefore, Trinh’s case as a national and sexual abject displays the gendered complexities in the refugee displacement in terms of being a mother, considering the fact that the children’s experience converges with that of mothers, as the primary caregivers in refugee immigration scenarios. The precarious camp conditions become more difficult if the woman takes her child’s responsibility by herself in the transition period to a new life in host countries. In this sense, the silence of the grandmother character Hoa who is also subjected to sexual harassment by another Vietnamese man, displays the internalization of traditional gender roles that compel the woman to cope with the trauma by herself. Nevertheless, the state of ‘inexistence’ before the law and the absence of protection leads the women to develop different strategies to survive and protect loved ones. Trinh converts her forced silence into a conditional silence against the Malay guards, threatening to abuse her child.

When it comes to communicating and reclaiming the trauma and abjection, generational differences do not allow for an ultimate and generalized deduction. Trinh's confession to her mother-in-law, both as female companion and family elderly, also is not met with the necessary understanding and precaution. As a traditional woman, Hoa purports to keep it private just as she endures her husband's years-long abuse and that of the other residents in the camp space. Hoa, as the eldest woman of the house demands Trinh to be silent to ensure peace in the family. In his elaborations on the ethic(s) of memory, Viet T. Nguyen reminds that "all classes and groups are invested in strategic forgetting for the sake of their own interests" (Nguyen, "Just Memory" 11).

While the oldest of the generation Hoa objects to articulate her and her daughter-in-law's abuse as a consequence of the patriarchal social structure of Vietnamese society that she is molded by, Xuan as the younger generation also refuses to talk about the sexual abuse of his mother. In other words, Xuan, once at the risk of bodily abjection himself as a refugee child, sees his mother as abject and opts concealing his feelings. Despite his refusal, trauma exposure and fear, even if not registered consciously back then, unpredictably manifest their affective influence/responses on the refugee conscious in later years. Xuan, as a teenage high school boy, mentions recollecting "the distinct, pungent perspiration" of the Malay guards all of a sudden in his daily life in Paris (Phan 158). The smell takes him to "the hopelessness of that night" in the camp, causing him to feel numb and distracted (Phan 158). Xuan's reaction can be perceived as suppressing his mother's abjection rather than the feeling of disgust evoked in relation to abjection. A similar threat arises to the constitution of his "I" during the maternal abjection at the pre-linguistic semiotic stage. His mother's demand to talk is to transgress the borders drawn between the mother and the child during the formation of "I" since speaking of it now threatens his identity as a Vietnamese French teenager. As Kristeva defines "[t]he abject has...one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (1). Instead of the liminal state of being that he sees as a threat due to his Vietnamese identity, Xuan prefers to belong and become a part of the broader French nation, at least up until a point in his upbringing.

Trinh turns to religion to purify her feeling of “filth” and “shame,” which are her affective responses to abjection. Yet, it does not offer a recovery for her. Her insistent, almost neurotic dependence on Xuan illustrates her post-traumatic stress disorder and her emotional reliance on Xuan to testify her innocence in the event and acknowledge her endurance as a survival strategy. Xuan fulfills an anchoring function, as his existence provides Truong with emotional stability most of the time, since Xuan is her only witness in the assault. Realizing that silence harms more than it protects, Trinh even talks to Cherry about her traumatic assault during one of Cherry’s visits to France. Against Hoa’s negative reaction, Trinh reveals her discomfort in “pretending” as she already blames her in laws for not protecting her and sees the whole family as “cursed” (252). As she responds: “Look what happened to me when I didn’t. Aren’t things better when we are finally truthful?” (247)

Indeed, speaking out empowers Trinh who rejects “the luxury of amnesia” and struggles to heal. She subverts not only the enforcement of Confucian traditions on Vietnamese women such as the imposed silence but also the cost of war specifically on women. As a Hmong American woman who refuses to remain silent, Mai Kao Thao states, “conflicts cannot be resolved with silence, only deepened and catalyzed through it” (19). Nations which position the foreigners/ strangers, in this case, the Vietnamese refugees outside its boundaries, leave them alone in their struggle to recover in the face of irreparable harms that they are responsible for in the first place. However, maintaining silence in an effort to protect oneself and loved ones for women contributes to preserving the same patriarchal and national structures that will harm future generations. For Trinh, it is instead a denial of her abjection arising out of externally imposed harm and internalization of silence that troubles her. Verbalizing comes as an empowerment that discloses the trauma and finding ways to recover as opposed to victim stereotypes.

2.2. HOME-MAKING AND MAKING A LIVING AS DISPLACED MOTHERS

Given the conditions of “inexistence” for the refugee overseas before moving into the resettlement country, the idea of rebuilding life and establishing a new sense of belonging in the displacement is critical, especially for the Vietnamese female refugee after their

abject transitional status at the camp. Although they engage in several community-building practices within the camp to alleviate their sense of scattering, the conditions of the camp space cannot provide healthy and safe physical and psychological conditions for its inhabitants. On top of all the insufficient sanitary measures, transgression of privacy and their temporary status in the camp space with legal uncertainty restricts Vietnamese refugees' autonomy and their freedom of movement.

Likewise, in *The Reeducation*, the effort to build a new life is closely related to the role of the female refugee who has to deal with a simultaneous process of home-making for family members and their own processes of adjusting to a new environment, which is not always welcoming. Their precarious status as Vietnamese refugee is furthered by their national abjection that challenge their relations with their new societies because the Vietnamese refugee has a "shifting relation to Americanness" [and Frenchness in this context]" (Shimakawa 3). In this part, the lives of Vietnamese refugee families in two separate Western nations, the US and France are examined through the relationship of two maternal figures with their families and their host societies. Moreover, it depicts the exclusionary and marginalizing mechanisms of national abjection on refugee lives. Regarding grandmother figures, Bui mentions

Cherry's two grandmothers are two separate character studies. One is a single mother who raised her children through devious schemes and plotting, while the other is a cloistered mother and wife who dutifully provides for her family at the expense of her own individual happiness. As two contrasting feminine archetypes, the grandmothers epitomize the refugee will to survive by any means necessary. (90)

Despite their opposite coping strategies, the older generation has a constructive role in displacement and resettlement for the Vietnamese refugee Hoa, Cherry's paternal grandmother and a displaced refugee woman in France who finds fulfillment through her enactment of traditional gender roles while facilitating her family's adaptation process. Kim Ly, the maternal grandmother in America, acts more as an authority figure over her extended family with the economic influence she has as a business woman. Their contrasting lives and conditions reflect both the multitude of experiences for the refugee as well as the historical and political contradictions Vietnamese refugees are exposed to. Both families, respectively, display a national abject position to the American and French

public in general, while the members of first-generation Vietnamese, in particular Hoa and Kim Ly exemplify the strategies to deploy and reverse these culturally and politically imposed abject positions for the sake of survival and adaptability. The first-generation Vietnamese overcome the physical constraints that their national abject subject positions created in the public sphere. Yet, their feeling of foreigner as a reflection of refugee condition stays in personal sense.

As the main homemaker in the Truong family, Hoa stays motivated through her dream of a home during the hard times at the camp. As Fathi underlines, refugee camps as “unhomes” marked by a “lack of agency in drawing the boundaries of home and who is allowed in or out” (Fathi 987). With their indeterminate periods of stay and inadequate living conditions, the refugee camp cannot be replaced with a home for Hoa who repeatedly tells her husband: “This isn’t a home” (29). With the precarious positions and privacy invasions at the camp, as seen in Hoa and Trinh’s exposure to sexual assault and harassment, her lack of control intensifies her desperate yearning for a house between the walls. She ponders:

They could rebuild a home. Hoa could prepare proper meals again. She wondered if she could remember her recipes, the ones their cook taught her after they moved to Saigon. Could she find the proper spices and vegetables in France? Where would they live? Would Yen’s home be comfortable for all of them? Wherever it was, Hoa could find her private space again? It didn’t have to be too large, she could even make do with another closet, just something that was entirely hers. (Phan 49)

Hoa is an obedient type of wife and mother who “had long ago given up her own comforts for her sons and then their wives and then their children” as she treats her husband with respect as the Confucian principles dictate (Phan 29). More importantly, Hoa’s dreams about reestablishing a new life seem to be a replication of their former household routine in their new life while she is hoping to maintain cultural aspects of their origins. Nevertheless, their transition to a new life does not connote an easy process as they always confront the fact that they are national abjects, who could only blend into the French society within the boundaries drawn by the nation itself. More than a gendered act, Hoa’s struggle is for building a life for herself and her family in resettlement. Espiritu argues, “[i]n this hostile environment, some women of color, in contrast to their white

counterparts, view unpaid domestic work—having children and maintaining families—more as a form of resistance to racist oppression than as a form of exploitation by men” (*Asian American* 6).

In “Kristeva’s Stranger Within,” Fiona Barclay reflects on Kristeva’s notion of the foreigner and defines the consequences of abjection on a personal level, emphasizing the foreigner’s pain after “the loss of mother, of motherland, and often of mother tongue” (6). Returning to theory of abjection, this kind of separation is necessary for the subject to form an individual identity. Likewise, the Truong family has to flee Vietnam to survive even if they will occupy the national abject positions. The family is not aware of the immediate outcomes of relocation with the relief of fleeing a war-torn country. Yet, the physical and psychological effect(s) of loss can appear in various forms. As seen in Hoa, the first instance of abjection in the host country France, occurs through a direct personal experience of changing weather: “The cold” as Phan writes was Hoa’s “first impression of France” (88). When their sponsor family and people from the Catholic church meet them at the airport, the first thing that attracts her attention is “the puffy coats their bodies were stuffed in” (88). As she anxiously thinks “Would she be able to walk in such European coats and boots?” (89). She feels strange as the weather registers itself as an affective feeling of estrangement for Hoa.

Regarding the experience of abjection for the foreigner, Cynthia L. Fortner writes, that “the foreigner in another land, hearing and speaking another language, can feel strange, as if a stranger to the familiarity of social and linguistic experience, which has now become discontinuous, displaced, distorted and even disconnected, lost, and thus, abject” (27-28). Thus, Hoa’s experience of cold can be perceived as “the realization and often learned recognition of affect that points towards the replaying of abject” (Fortner). In this sense, her anxiety in the face of feeling the cold as opposed to the warmer climate of Vietnam, can first be interpreted as her realization of rupture from the homeland as a refugee and first experience of feeling as abject foreigner in France. As war-traumatized refugees, they have no choice but to leave the country of origin or live under an authoritarian regime. However, leaving it never guarantees a complete sense of belonging at least for the first generation. Nationally inflicted abject position and their liminal

position in the national space will constantly be evoked through direct and indirect experiences particularly during their interaction with French people.

The position of foreigner and national abject does not paralyze Hoa, who is the principal homemaker, but creates a site of resistance and freedom at home, while keeping her family together through her nurturing role. The crowded household, compounded with immobility due to the weather limited their area of action into the interiors of house. In this model, where interdependence among kin relations play a crucial role in sustaining household economy and survival, Hoa as a Vietnamese woman has an important role in sustaining this responsibility. At the same time, she is dealing with her tyrannical husband Hung. As Janet Graham writes, “[r]efugee women are generally responsible for the majority of the work required to continue this daily struggle to survive” (81). Bringing his lover and children with the seats he buys for co-in-laws, he verbally and emotionally abuses Hoa for years. Despite discovering Hung’s infidelity years later and the fact that they were on the same boat on their way to France, she continues to take care of her husband out of her traditional upbringing and her financial dependence.

Furthermore, Hoa’s affective state of mind stemming from exposure to the colder climate of France foreshadows the Truong family’s struggles to adapt to a new culture and environment in France. After spending years at the camp, she believes she could finally attain the feeling of home in Paris, where her son Yen resides. As Fathi notes, “Although home in flux changes (particularly in migration experiences, both domestically and publicly), there is still an innate need to feel close to the idea of having a physical home to which one can take refuge” (986). The big family mansion designed by a French architect back in Vietnam, is replaced by the “flimsy walls and floors” of Yen’s small apartment, located in a former Vietnamese immigrant neighborhood (Phan 86). Yet, maintaining her domestic skills-traditions (which is also as a part of her nurturing motherly role) ruptured by the camp in the resettlement country is a critical part of keeping the family together in the toughest time of adaptation to the host country. Her anxieties about the loss of culinary traditions (cooking materials) and of space in the physical/material space in the above extract points to her effort for preserving cultural heritage while developing a belonging in the resettlement country. In this vein, “the

everyday activities of mothers in maintaining tradition and in keeping kin ties alive can therefore be seen as resistance and political” (qtd. in Tran-Peters 7). Keeping her new household running smoothly is Hoa’s way of handling challenging diaspora circumstances.

The location and physical conditions of Yen’s home in the resettlement country mirror another consequence of their economic marginalization and the downward social mobility as national abjects. A former affluent person in Vietnam, the patriarch of the Truong family, Hung “used to manage a very fancy hotel in Nha Trang,” a top-ranking place which was hosting people of high rank and power (Phan 66). Coming to France with the remaining family—after Sanh’s family left for America—the economic adaptation comes to the fore for the Vos family whose survival mostly depends on their lawyer son Yen. Yet, it appears that the ways of living in France and America do not correspond to life in Vietnam. Firstly, the financial stability with Yen’s income does not correspond to their previous life standards since he is the only person who supports the whole family financially with his income for a while. Moreover, the cultural differences pose a threat to their social integration with the French community and situation as “foreigners.” For instance, they have problem with the neighbors. Hung states, “It must have been the cooking and how loud we are. Not that they weren’t loud with their wooden shoes and constant dinner parties. But we won out, eventually. They moved away” (Phan 83). Moving to the above and below floors vacated by their neighbors, the family members of the Truong family form a kind of family enclave based on cooperation and Hoa’s caregiving.

Their relationship with the sponsor family, the Bourdains, not only exemplifies a microcosm of the racial and cultural abjection of Vietnamese refugees by the French society, but also shows the need of re-establishing destabilized boundaries. France was one of those countries that accepted Vietnamese refugees under the sponsorship program (Dorais 113). Starting from their transfer from Pulau Bidong, the Bourdains assist the Truongs in critical stages of their resettlement process, including arranging a living to the whole family. However, generous physical and emotional support of the Bourdains’ family is reminiscent of the benevolent practices of Western nations made under the

humanitarian discourses. In other words, the Bourdains' desire to help the Truong family is to mimic the benevolent Other assuming "we [the Vietnamese] enjoyed their control" (Phan 94):

"Our ancestors caused such injustice to your people," Michel had said at the Truongs' welcome party during a toast to a crowd of his closest friends and business associates. "We never should have left you with the Communists. We abandoned you then, but we will not do it again. We are honored to help the people of our former colony." (Phan 94)

As underlined by Mr. Bourdain himself, their relationship involves a relationship of superiority and inferiority complex. Their rationale is driven by France's century-old colonial mentality based on belief in the superiority of French national identity rather than good will. France had to end its almost six decades long colonial presence in Southeast Asia with its defeat in the 1954 Indochina War despite the American military and economic support (Herring, "America and Vietnam" 108). Remembering that the other is "at some fundamental level an undifferentiable part of the whole" for the constitution of national identity as a process of national abjection, it seems that the Truong family reminds the Bourdains of France's being once an influential colonial power in the first place.

On the surface, the Bourdains try to compensate their colonizer ancestors' guilt through their generous support for the Truongs, for their "mistake" of "le[aving] you [the Vietnamese] with the communists" (94). However, certain encounters between the two families, specifically in one of the family gathering scenes in the Bourdains' home and Cam's pregnancy, one of the granddaughters of the Truong family from the Bourdains' son, make their actual motivation apparent. The Bourdains' concern for the well-being of the Truong's is about the unfinished business of discursive hegemony engendered by Western colonialism under the guise of Western humanitarian ideologies of altruism. It becomes apparent especially at the encounters between the two families.

During one of their monthly visits to the Bourdains for brunch after church, Hoa insists on preparing shrimp toasts, a traditional Vietnamese appetizer, remembering Mr. Bourdain found it delicious the last time she made it: "Mr. Bourdain enjoyed them so

much last time” (Phan 88). Hung objects to her idea, arguing that the heavy odor of the food will “stink up the entire church” (88). Nevertheless, Hoa makes it and the Bourdains refuse to eat it, excusing the stomach discomfort the last time they taste it. Madame Emilie tells to Hoa: “You have to remember our French stomachs, Madame Truong. They can’t handle the spices and oils that your people use all the time” (97). Even though her words seem harmless, they carry contempt, implying their presumed privileged subject position.

On a deeper level, their attitude towards Hoa’s treat exposes the racial dynamics of colonial power relations, repeating themselves in the quotidian details of refugee lives. Considering the importance of food as a marker of cultural identity, Uma Narayan writes that “[t]hinking about food has much to reveal about how we understand our personal and collective identities” (64). The scene exemplifies an instance where the Bourdains put forward a sense of their national distinctiveness over food. On the potential of food as abject, Kristeva states that food “becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories” (75). The border may include cultural and spiritual borders. However, this split occurs “not because of anything that inheres in them but because they threaten the identity of the self or the social order” (McAfee 49). In this case, the Vietnamese food turns into carrying a nationally charged quality that the Bourdains imply their supremacy by scorning “the spices and oils” used in Vietnamese cuisine.

Hung’s warning of Hoa is mixed with contempt and displays the internalized feeling of accepting Western superiority. His reprimanding of Hoa at another scene also demonstrates the internalization of “gratitude,” to use Mimi Nguyen’s phrasing, to their former colonizer: “France may once have been our colonizer, but now it is our grandchildren’s country,” he said. “We need to respect their new home” (94). At this point, his thankfulness is intricately related to their “bondage” to the host country, particularly in a material sense. Therefore, it could be interpreted as a strategy of survival employed by the first-generation Truong family elders. As Bui notes, “Phan’s novel ‘brings to life what Pelaud describes as a ‘a deep sense of vulnerability that leads to survival strategies heavy with contradictions that manifest themselves differently along gender and ethnic lines and are heightened by lack of financial resources’ (qtd. in 78). There is a mutual interest in the giving and receiving nature of this freedom for the first-

generation refugee subject given their effort to provide a better future for their descendants. In other words, for the first-generation Vietnamese refugee, there is no escape from falling into the contradictory dictates of the model minority stereotype to adapt and overcome political and cultural barriers.

More importantly, the Vietnamese food at the Bourdain's dinner table is a symbolic representation of reaffirmation of the national abject position of the Truong family as the Bourdain family confirms the nationally drawn borders in micro level. In a theoretical sense, thinking food as one of the abject representations besides bodily waste and sexual difference, their aversion to shrimp toasts evokes a kind of abjection and corresponds to a kind of disgust.²⁵ Rethinking abjection as a descriptive paradigm to understand the formation of the subject and its reinforcing position in establishing the boundaries of the self, the relationship between the two families presents the fragile relationship between the two nations that is bound with boundaries in relation to race and class. Despite their seemingly inclusive politics, an attempt to violate these boundaries triggers the defensive mode of the nation, as the subject against those who "problematize the boundaries" (Arya 54).

The limits of tolerance are clearly apparent in the scene where Cam, Cherry's cousin on the paternal side, reveals her pregnancy with the Bourdains' son Michel. The reducing contact between the Bourdains and Truongs after Tuyet's breakdown in Lourdes, is destroyed with Cam's pregnancy. The immediate reaction of Monsieur Bourdain to his son upon hearing the news is: "Were you stupid enough to impregnate her?" (205). His insulting tone not only bespeaks his implicit despise of the Truongs in personal sense, but also the reaction of the society against the national abject who dares to test the fragile boundaries. For one thing, pregnancy is an abject process where the border between the self and the other is abolished (Sevgi 63). For another thing, "the subject is dependent on what it expels in order to define itself and preserve its borders" (Sevgi 66). A union among

²⁵ The concept of disgust is related to "act of expulsion" in Kristeva's account where the child "the nascent body [of the child] tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides" during childbirth (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 101). In other words, it is the moment the child "rejects its mother in order to establish a border between self and (m)other to form its own subjectivity" (Vaziri 233). As Vaziri continues, "[t]hroughout life, the subject will always return to this primal moment of maternal rejection when confronted with the abject" (234).

the families by the tie of child or marriage will blur the symbolic borders and distinction between two families that is based on racial qualities. It is unacceptable considering the politically and culturally imposed inferior position of the Truong family. The Truong family cannot be the counterpart of the Bourdains in terms of racial equality as it will put them into an abject position as well. Overlooking Michel's role, Mr. Bourdain places the whole responsibility on Cam and blames her for seducing his son, claiming that they "have taught him better than this" (206). In doing so, he also speaks to the sexual stereotype of the seductive Asian woman who poses "a peculiar spiritual danger and often hidden threat to the Westerner" (qtd. in Shimakawa 16).

Moreover, Monsieur Bourdain rebukes Hung, now an aging man with Alzheimer's disease, for not preventing such an undesirable situation from occurring. The blame shift over the parental responsibility in their children's upbringing divulges the racial and class inclusion barriers that the Truongs sometimes delude themselves about being close to the Bourdains. It also parallels the paternalistic attitude of the nation state as Mr. Bourdain sees in himself the right to scold Hung for their endeavor to transgress the invisible sociopolitical borders as abjects. They exercise a "performance of superiority" as mentioned by critical refugee scholars, "in which moral responsibility . . . is based on pity rather than the demand for justice" (81-82).

Abjection and dealing with this subject position are also obvious in the lives of Cherry's side in America. The exclusion from the larger material privileges and social order negatively impacts their lives and causes them to be in a more dependent relationship with the extended family. As Kibria mentions, "[t]raditional family arrangements may be threatened by migration but also reinforced as immigrants turn to their families for help and support in their efforts to build a new life" (Kibria 14). Likewise, apart from the cultural norms, the financial barriers in America, as seen in the downward mobility of Cherry's father, Sanh, a multilingual well-educated man working as a janitor necessitates a more financially dependent relationship model.

Kim-Ly, the matriarch figure of Cherry's maternal line is an example of the strategic deployment of national abject position as a refugee that not only enables them to have a

life overseas, but also a sustainable future for subsequent generations. As the class structure of Vietnamese families is toppled with the process that started with the war and displacement, their adaptation processes overlap with racial issues as the structural barriers starting from the camp space confine some refugee women to the domestic sphere or low-paying jobs in resettlement while they lead the others to engage in illegal channels of money making including illicit income to survive. As a single mother and the main breadwinner of the Vo family in Vietnam, Kim Ly continues to support her family in America, establishing her own business, a beauty salon where she recruits her daughters and daughters in laws.

Although she has a traditional mindset in terms of her expectations, there is a strategic enactment of the national abject subject position by Kim Ly through her commitment to achievement both to her own and her family's ends. Apart from managing the socioeconomic challenges in displacement, she plays with the racialized model minority stereotype while displaying all the contradictions embedded in it. For the Vietnamese refugees, the model minority stereotype seemed to be a good opportunity to reduce the impact of politically imposed victimized stereotypes associated especially after the waves of immigration in the 1980s (Lieu 19). The Vietnamese youth plays a crucial role in achieving this ideal with their academic achievement at school. Therefore, Kim Ly's relationship with her children and grandchildren is particularly important for showing the dilemmas both in refugee lives and inconsistencies around the ideal, the government and society lay down as criterion for assimilation.

For Kim Ly, the survival of their descendants "depended on" the "courtesy" of showing respect to the elderly (Phan 118). According to her, the ideal upbringing could have been through "constant fear of poverty, hunger, and a corrupt government" as it was in Vietnam (Phan 117). Since living there is no longer an option, she insists on upholding traditional family values in America to maintain her authority. Moreover, better living standards and chances compared to their parents create a generational conflict other than the identity conflict for the younger family members. Yet, Kim Ly's portrayal of Vietnam as a place of despair and instability represents their "denunciation of communist atrocities" in Vietnam (Espiritu *Body Counts* 150). It can also be interpreted in line with the

significance of “parental authority” in Vietnamese lives as one of the central tenants of Confucianism (Kibria 54). While it assigns the mothers with a decisive role in their child/ren’s lives, including the critical ones such as marriage, the children are supposed to support their parents and elder family members in many aspects as well as financially (Kibria 131-132).

Kim Ly’s implications about the role of family in the life of grand/children could also be read through its ideological connotations and “the family as a metaphor for the nation-state” (Ly 718). Although Ly uses the metaphor in the context of gender identity, it is also useful in examining the pressure of families on their children to become good citizens. Kim Ly’s strong emphasis on filial piety resonates a similar attitude with the US government which interpellates the Vietnamese refugees as abject subjects. Kim Ly’s financial resource is her most important advantage to exercise power over the family. Moreover, the filial obligations and model minority stereotype converge and contradict in critical ways as the families try to direct the lives of Vietnamese youth according to traditional Vietnamese family culture and American political tools. These tools, as Shimakawa underlines, require situating themselves within the “dominant models of ‘proper’ American citizenly values and practices (including subjection to the law, heteronormative and patriarchal ‘family values,’ and especially the pursuit of higher education)” (13). Therefore, the attempt to embrace and preserve two contrasting sets of society values deepens the generation gap and reinforces the liminality of the younger generation.

Returning back to the adaptation processes of the first-generation Vietnamese, the good refugee image provides a good outlet to survive and justify themselves to the American public that they deserve ‘benevolence.’ To this end, the first generation is marked by their “tremendous sense of personal responsibility and desire to become good subjects” (Lieu 23). They have to “work diligently to further the ideals of American pluralism and contribute to the American Dream” (xxi). Kim Ly’s establishing her own business in America seems to serve as a good example of working toward attaining the promised life through hard work. Nevertheless, the fact that her investments in the underground business is her main source of income reveals the optimism and delusion of success in a

society molded by racial stratification. There is no easy transition to a better life for the first-generation refugee subject as they try to overcome unspoken inequalities based on race, class, ethnicity and gender. Stacy J. Lee writes, “as a hegemonic device the model minority stereotype maintains the dominance of whites in the racial hierarchy by diverting attention away from racial inequalities and by setting standards for how minorities should behave” (31).

Kim Ly’s influence on her grandchildren’s career path such as conditional financing them only through the medical school, or her collaboration with street gangs to “save” her grandchild Lum, Cherry’s brother from his gambling addiction, further reveals the possibility of failure to meet these expectations for everyone and so the potential of younger generation to challenge those political and familial subject positions. With his disobedience and poor school performance, Lum does not find a place neither within the family nor the American society. In an argument with his cousin Dat on Grandmother Vo’s birthday, Lum is punished with humiliation while Dat manipulates Lum by exposing his being called “Dumb Lum” at school (Phan 75).

However, the family’s focus on academic excellence instead of recognizing Lum’s potential for athletic sports amplifies his alienation, worsened by his illegal activities. Engaging in gambling and being involved in the events leading up to the shooting of his sister, Cherry, Lum is expelled to Vietnam by his family. That is not to say that academic performance is the only success venue for every refugee child, yet a reluctance or inaction to identify with endangers politically and socially imposed the model minority stereotype at this point: “Lum was already ten years old when she [Kim Ly] finally arrived in America, too late to correct the mistakes of his parents, too late for so many things” (Phan 117). Therefore, for Lum, both as a minority and rebellious child, a failure to perform the good child and student role comes to mean his alienation from his family and society. The increasing tension in the family mostly arising from the constraints of the model minority stereotype, lead Lum to look for alternative ways to prove his personal value through gambling and hanging out with gang members.

Kim Ly's efforts to succeed and thereby surviving includes her ambition about her nail salon where she recruits her family members and people from the Vietnamese community. To promote her salon, she bribes the Miss Little Saigon Pageant committee where her granddaughter Duyen participates. Kim Ly's act demonstrates her reckless determination to overcome the material conditions and intersecting vulnerabilities of Vietnamese refugees in the long run. In this respect, the feminization of labor due to the inefficient policies and structural barriers such as "limited education, skills and English fluency" is a key factor among the Southeast women in general and Vietnamese families in this context to make a living (Espiritu, "Refugee Lifemaking Practices" 198). Her resilience and investments to guarantee a future financial security for herself and family come from the years-long economic and mental damage caused by the war and loss of her eldest son at the reeducation camp. Furthermore, Kim Ly's pressuring her grandchildren towards socially approved successful career positions with the intention of ensuring a good quality of life for themselves are a part of the effort to be seen and recognized by the American society. Although it will place the younger generation as abject model minorities, Kim Ly prefers them becoming the privileged members of symbolic order instead of falling into the "pathetic" refugee stereotype.

Kim Ly's salon is a typical example of racialized labor, just as laundrymats and restaurants that can be associated with the radical jettisoning of the nation. They encapsulate exploitation, class struggle, and structural inequalities as abject Asian professions in the US. She is a good refugee who creates her own means of survival, not being a burden on the state. Yet, her involvement in the illegal work demonstrates how the dynamics of structural racism and the national abjection also push the Vietnamese to create alternative ways of living to have the least damage from this unfavorable subject position. In any way, both Kim Ly and Hoa exemplify the "Asian American women [who] emerged as active agents who shaped their own lives and not as objects excluded or acted on by others" (Espiritu, *Asian American* 3).

Therefore, national abjection offers a survival working through and against the abjection on the part of the Vietnamese refugee family. In other words, the representation of the exposure to wealth of their families, be it atrocities of war and subordination to the

dictates of national abjection as minority subjects are a part of the process of resisting against the forces that have produced these conditions in the first place. The same resistant attitude observed in Kim Ly's effort to survive displays the elusive nature of the American dream and fragility of a national identity for the refugee subject rather than the legitimacy of victim stereotypes.

2.3. CONFRONTATION WITH "THE STRANGER WITHIN THE SELF": DISRESPECTFUL VIETNAMESE DAUGHTER

In the novel, the first-generation Vietnamese present a strong determination in maintaining their ethnic identity while striving to create skills to survive in the host societies. In coming to the US, Vietnamese refugees dreamed of "assimilation, fitting in, and becoming free subjects in an advanced capitalist society" (Lieu xv). Nevertheless, the refugee subject is under the constant implication of abjection, with a shifting relation to American national identity. Their struggle to adapt and have a better life manifests itself in their tendency to conform to subject positions imposed on them. Mimi Nguyen writes on this "gratitude" expectation through her metaphor, "the gift of freedom," to explain how the Vietnamese refugee is inflicted with a kind of debt to recompense the freedom bestowed under generosity and humanitarianism. Apart from being the subjects of the capitalist system, "those who are obliged to accept the gifts of freedom (sometimes to the point of death)," Nguyen says, "are denied such a relation to the past" (181). In other words, the refugee has to deal with the continuing effects of war and dispossession in displacement at the expense of a "racial, colonial subjectivity" (Mimi Nguyen 181). Accordingly, the younger members of Vietnamese refugee generations have to share the consequences of this subjectivity as national abjects while history is usually kept untold by the elders. When their beliefs, views and ways of life evolve into the opposite direction to their elderly's wishes, a generational conflict arises and causes their estrangement starting from the family.

Apart from the fear of exclusion in their host societies and abstinence from recurring trauma, the intergenerational relationships in *The Reeducation* are entangled by the unspoken stories which sometimes consist of personal "vices" and mistakes. Guilt,

shame, the fear of blame, and refusal to take responsibility over life matters create a gap in transmitting memory, thereby the past in the novel. The exploration of individual and collective memory as a present projection of the haunting traces of the past sometimes depends on the personal effort which results in confusion about one's sense of identity. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud points out to an inevitable tendency to delve into the past in establishing a connection with one's sense of being for the forcibly displaced Vietnamese American writer in these words,

It is no coincidence that the recollection and processing of the past in Viet Nam plays an important role in Vietnamese American literature. Because of the involuntary nature of departure from that country, texts written by Vietnamese Americans cannot be read as *any* text, as certain postmodern thinkers suggest, nor always in isolation of an author's intent and experience. (51)

In line with Pelaud's argument, it can be stated that the idea of silence and gratitude is a recurring theme in Vietnamese American literature both as a political and cultural attitude. Absence of direct experience of the war and broken transmittance of knowledge create ambiguity and confusion for the younger generation which is expected to participate in the "political conformity" as their parents did. Therefore, "the act of writing itself is intimately linked with the wish to rectify social history, to serve as witness to the past, and to foster individual and collective healing and self-definition" (Pelaud 51). However, in Phan's novel, the exploration of past elicits an uncomfortable sentiment especially for the first-generation family members who prefer to abstain from dealing with their past decisions.

The book is preceded by a prologue that portrays Cherry's travel to Saigon, Vietnam in 2001. Cherry is determined to get her brother Lum, whom she thinks "suffers, so far away from home" back to America (Phan 18). Her insistence on Lum's return also stems from her belief that "[Vietnam is] not home" as Cherry has no preconception of her country of origin (13). The spatial, temporal and geographical distance from Vietnam leads Cherry, as a second-generation Vietnamese to identify herself as an "American" (Phan 9). To her mothers' warnings about scammers in Vietnam that may trick Cherry to get an immigration visa, Cherry has a profound confidence in asserting her Americanness repeatedly, guaranteeing her parents that she would not "get stuck in Vietnam" like those

“returning to the motherland” (Phan 9). The end of the prologue, however, marks Cherry’s sudden decision to stay longer in Vietnam, and she even considers a permanent move there while exploring the discontinuities in their family relationships caused by dislocation and unspoken histories.

Cherry’s decision to stay in Vietnam and trace her roots through her family’s past lives points to a common issue in second generation Vietnamese narrative: identity. Her family’s silence about the past and mother’s reluctance to send her to Vietnam challenges her perception of identity that ends up in her realization about her liminality in American society and being foreign to her country of origin. It could be stated that the impacts of contradictory subject positions are felt worse by the Vietnamese daughters who are caught up in traditional family structures and dominant American political discourses. Cherry has a problematic relationship with her mother Tuyet who expects her daughter Cherry to be a dutiful daughter while blaming Cherry for failing to protect her brother and to become a good daughter. Tuyet’s assumption, however, is closely linked to her own sense of guilt as a Vietnamese daughter who was once burdened by her mother with a rescuer role she failed to fulfill. In this respect, the conflict between Tuyet and Cherry embodies the double gender standards apparent in the parental differential treatment of Truong family with the extra responsibilities the Vietnamese daughters are forced to take on.

Writing on the intergenerational conflict in Asian immigrant families through the figure of the Asian daughter, Erin Khue Ninh criticizes “the immigrant nuclear family as a special form of capitalist enterprise” (*Ingratitude* 2). In this vein, the model minority paradigm serves as a convenient model for the refugee families to raise dutiful children, subservient young members for upward social and economic mobility. Yet, it is a model of subject formation that is “racially and gender-specific to, second generation Asian American daughters” (11). The process brings out “a language of filiality—sacrifice, obedience, hierarchy, gratitude” (11). As Ninh thinks the issue is

not whether an Asian immigrant family currently meets the socioeconomic or professional measures of the model minority. Rather, the issue is whether it aspires to do so, whether it applies those metrics: not resentful of the racializing discourse of Asian success as a violence imposed from without,

but implementing that discourse, with ingenuity, alacrity, and pride, from within. (*Ingratitude* 9)

Beyond Vietnamese cultural imperatives, the families (un)willingly transform into perpetrators of those cultural discourses and deny the children agency as a default consequence. Elsewhere, Ninh writes that the filial piety is an affective structure that implies “heightened, habitual sense of inadequacy, of indebtedness” (Ninh “Affect/Family/Filiality” 50). One side effect of such extra pressure on the younger generation is “unintended actions and expressions” (50). While obedience is a probable answer to filial piety, Ninh underlines the defiance and depression as two other important affective responses. Being exposed to the dynamics of model minority stereotype makes Cherry vulnerable to national abjection. Nevertheless, her interrogation of the past and struggle to find answers related to it after her first journey to Vietnam encapsulates not only the resistance of the second-generation female in the face of these social and familial power structures, but also includes the complexities related to her collective and individual identity.

Broadly speaking, the expectations of Vietnamese refugee parents in this context can be understood in terms of repayment of their sacrifices due to the difficult conditions they find themselves in and recovering the mistakes in their personal stories related to the larger national context. The issue is, however, the responsibilities that the Vietnamese parents take or fail to take and choices made out of self-interest are sometimes reflected as sacrifices made in the name of family. The parental expectations, coupled with political and cultural norms thus may evolve into a demand for an unquestioned obedience and gratitude by the first generation and bring out a denial of personal autonomy for the second generation.

To this end, academic performance is a significant conditional effect to be achieved on their way to succeed in the American Dream in return for paying this national debt and their parents’ sacrifices. For the younger members of the Truong family in America and the Vo family in France, the endeavor to transmit and enact these ideologies occurs through their nuclear and extended family’s insistence on molding them into successful good citizens by having a proper education. As Kibria mentions, academic achievement

is considered “the central” and “effective route for socioeconomic achievement” for the younger generation (Kibria 153-154).

The cousins on Cherry’s maternal side in America compete with each other to prove themselves to their families as worthy of all the sacrifices made for them. The emphasis on the young Vietnamese’s success, as with Cherry and her brother, indicates the persistence of the racialized dynamics of good refugee dynamics in domestic structures. Nevertheless, the model minority stereotype, coupled with parental pressure, negatively affects the refugee child, as exemplified by Cherry and Lum. She is forced to take the responsibility on the basis of academic achievement and take her brother under her wing. Lum, on the other hand, fails both as a student and dutiful son. His forced reverse exile turns into a voluntary stay in Vietnam. Thus, success, based on academic achievement is one of the points that create a generational conflict between Cherry and her family.

As the second child of the same family, Cherry displays more compliance with her parents’ hopes and expectations. Compared to Lum, her mother puts more pressure on Cherry with the excuse that “her daughter’s laziness was ruining her potential” (Phan 56). Her complaints related to having not enough playtime are declined by her mother who always reminds Cherry that studying is “a gift” compared to Vietnamese children who are “hungry, dirty, and sleeping on the corrupt, lawless streets” (57). According to her mother who values intelligence, her eidetic memory, a genetic trait she shares with her grandpère, Uncle Yen and cousin Xuan in France is a “waste” (56). Tuyet’s contempt towards Cherry’s ability stems not only from the practical reasons she relies on to make their way in American society but also her problematic relation with the past.

When Cherry questions her mother’s comparatively harder attitude towards herself, her father points to the difficulties they experienced in the past as a lonely refugee family: Tuyet’s loneliness and the load of responsibilities she has to take as a single mother due to Sanh’s successive nightshifts at the water treatment plant. Yet, there is no mention of past choices, decisions and the reasons for strained relationships with extended family members. The younger generation’s interest in the past bothers the family members since the past has to be kept in secret as abject. In this sense, the past corresponds to an uncanny

space that the displaced refugee does not want to confront in certain cases. Clearly, Truong's family's relation to the past represents the uncanny quality of Vietnam War history in micro level.

Tuyet's strict objection to Cherry's repeated journey to Vietnam and silence related to the past stems from her own problem with her mother Kim Ly and represents her fear of karmic punishment. Refusing to marry the elderly American soldier, arranged by her mother to escape Vietnam, Tuyet marries her boss Sanh. Despite his promise, Cherry's paternal grandfather Hung buys seats for his mistress instead of Tuyet's, his daughter-in-law's family in the refugee boat. Though they are destined to live in France with Sanh's family, Tuyet convinces Sanh to separate from the family and to move to America. After a while, Tuyet manages to bring her remaining family members to the United States, risking all the emotional and financial suffering they have to endure as a nuclear family. Nevertheless, her continuing sense of guilt tied to her disobedience to filial piety continues to haunt her, especially when coupled with her mother's ongoing anger. Cherry reflects Tuyet's continuing internal conflict. She reminds her mother of the defying self that she tries to forget and suppress.

Filial debt is central to the relationship between mother and daughter in Phan's novel while it changes in nature with the evolved generational differences and American discourses. Tuyet expects Cherry to manage what she feels to have failed by forcing her through academic achievement and protecting her brother even if she is the younger sister. The material dependence of Tuyet and her family on Kim Ly's financial influence, charts out a similar behavior pattern for the family. In this sense, Cherry disrupts what Tuyet envisages for the family while Cherry's repeated journeys to Vietnam and France correspond to "a resistance to the call of debt" (Bui 91).

Therefore, Vietnamese War history corresponds to an "uncanny" or *unheimlich* (or just abject) for the family as well since her mother cautions her against getting too involved with the lived history. Freud writes, "this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed" (*The Uncanny* 148). In elaborating the term, Freud

emphasizes Schelling's point of "repression" to indicate its importance as Schelling says, "the uncanny as something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open" (148). In other words, it may destabilize what is obscured or kept as secret. Thus, for the Truong family, going after their history equals to uncanny "unheimlich" in Freudian sense, (abject as it threatens the order in the family) as they do not come to terms with the "repressed" family history. Aside from all the losses and suffering during the war, the family has to live with the consequences of their in/voluntary choices.

Yet, the repression of history gives birth to a confusion within the younger generation that tries to figure out their place-identity in the host countries. As an American citizen, Cherry does not seem to have a direct experience of national abjection by the wider society. However, her resistant mode is perceived as a threat by her family because she is threatening the order in the family. This realization by the second generation is a threat to the systematic positioning of national abjection because it can result in a reaction to the national discourses that will cause a harm in collective level for the refugee families. Considering Kristeva's most referred definition of abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4), Cherry's defiant mode equals to an abject subject position regarding her family as she also starts to pose a threat to the collective and national system. She becomes abject as an undutiful daughter for going after the repressed history. Cherry's changing notion and relationship with the homeland signifies her evolving subjectivity, or to use Kristeva's wording, her being a subject-in-process as a second-generation Vietnamese. In a way, "[t]he theory of the subject-in-process . . . involves the notion of revolt, which is a state of ongoing questioning and inner uncertainty" (Stone 2004).

The resistant mode is followed by Cherry's realization of the foreignness within the self to come to terms with her existence and the complexities of her identity as a second-generation Vietnamese American. Defining her concept in terms of nationality, Kristeva describes "the foreignness" / "strangeness" as "living within us," and being "the hidden face of our identity" (*Strangers to Ourselves* 1).²⁶ She says, "the foreigner is within us.

²⁶ The "foreigner," however, is defined through national reception.

And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious” (191). To overcome the urge to exclude the other, one must recognize the foreigner inside. Hence, her concept allows reading identity through a deconstructive sense. In other words, there is no possibility of relying on a single, stable, or coherent identity that can be hierarchically categorized in social context. In her journey to Vietnam and later to France, opening the doors of the past and tracing the answers challenge Cherry’s conception of American identity—making sense of her identity and developing a sense of belonging to America. Nevertheless, her recognition of her foreignness to her Vietnamese self destabilizes her conception about her American identity.

Legally, Cherry is a US citizen who also considers herself as an American on the inside. She construes her first impressions of Vietnam through her cultural and emotional dissonance. Outside her comfort zone, Cherry has difficulty in adapting to the sedentary and noisy lifestyle in Vietnam. The physical conditions of her grandparents’ old house, now inhabited by their relatives, “with creaky floors,” “paper-thin walls” and water hammer noises ignite her distress further, causing her to imagine potential scenarios of household accidents: “She imagines one of them [water pipes] bursting, flooding the house, forcing them all out” (Phan 10). In this sense, Cherry is portrayed like an intrigued tourist whose effort to build attachment to her homeland is first defined over a distanced feeling: “Cherry never feels more American than they are walking. She guiltily buffers herself between her much frailer relatives, who never seem nervous as they weave through the steady cross flow of cars, motorbikes, and pedestrians, pulling Cherry through the city current” (11). The scene illustrates that Cherry is a foreigner in Vietnam in the national level as a second-generation Vietnamese who has been alienated from her culture and roots.

This process is followed by Cherry’s realization that her American subjectivity is also built according to her family’s thoughts and intentions. Born and raised in America, she is familiar with her cultural origins only through a selective transmission of her refugee family. However, her journey to Vietnam to bring her brother back to America, which she qualifies as “home,” becomes a journey toward her Vietnamese subjectivity as she realizes her “strangeness” related to her collective and individual identity, thereby to her

authentic roots. Her journey to Vietnam and then her beginning search for not responded answers leads Cherry to an inward interrogation. The following process of her transformation occurs through her “resistant mode to the call of filial piety” and a temporary break away from the subject positions her family and the sociocultural system prescribes.

The purposefully created knowledge gaps both in the family and the nation’s history complicate the intergenerational conversation and preserving social, cultural and emotional ties to homeland particularly for the younger generation. The process that begins with her journey to Vietnam, thereby realizing her foreignness, is followed by journeys towards unexplored parts of the past, tracing knowledge through her journey to France, and her confrontation with her mother’s letters in her grandmother’s drawer brings her closer to see and to come to terms with the complexities of her American and Vietnamese identities. When her mother Tuyet strictly opposes Cherry’s visit to Vietnam, she expresses her desire to solve the unresolved issues in her family relationships; to learn how they broke up with her father’s relatives and move to the US. According to Tuyet, the knowledge regarding their relocation and choices would “pollute” Cherry’s brain as she says, “Look at your problems in your textbooks. Those are the answers you want. Those are the ones that will help you” (Phan 10).

Not aware of what the journey to her country of origin holds for her, Cherry starts off on a temporospatial journey, reflecting the nonlinear structure of the novel. The unanswered questions related to past decisions and repressed emotions force the descendants of the Vietnamese, in this case Cherry, into a mazelike journey that takes the subject toward multidirectional history/memory paths. While learning some facts related to her family’s past challenges her collective identity, during this journey the past also includes secrets related to her existence. Upon her return to America, through her mother’s unread letters in her grandmother Kim Ly’s closet, she finds out that she is the unplanned child of the family. Appalled by the power of access to a secret related to her being leads her to an existential crisis. Traveling to Vietnam once more, Cherry’s “movement away” from the US functions as a journey of self-discovery, with the haunting presence of the past that plagues her life:

Once again, her mother's letters creep inside her skin, the angriest, most frustrated passages wrapping around her chest; her mother fancifully imagining a family of three, a more manageable number to care for, only one child to support—one dutiful, filial son. It was enough. . . . And then this other child had to come along and ruin everything. If Cherry hadn't been born, things could have been different. Once her mother introduced this possibility, even in decades-old letters, Cherry imagines fulfilling her mother's wish—of disappearing, of never existing. (348)

Cherry's existential crisis is closely related to the challenges, her family in particular, and the Vietnamese refugees in general have upon the forced displacement. They have to face racial and economic disparities such as limited employment opportunities, underpayment and discrimination which not only prolong their adaptation processes but also add more emotional distress to their struggle with financial troubles. Despite his former job in the Foreign Ministry and speaking three foreign languages, including English, French, and Spanish, Sanh (Cherry's father) can only start as a janitor in an elementary school in America. When Sanh's job insecurity is coupled with Tuyet's unintended pregnancy with Cherry, their survival in America turns into a more challenging process that affects their family relations even years later. Nevertheless, these struggles resonate on a more personal level on the younger generation whose liminal status usually creates confusion and drives them to revise their self-perception.

Drawing attention to the personal and political reasons of returning to Vietnam by the younger Vietnamese generations, Nina Ha uses Sunaina Maira's views on the return of second-generation Indians, stressing the parallelisms in Vietnamese experience:

For the second generation, the language of return expresses a sense of displacement that is, in most cases, based on emotional and political rather than geographical dislocation; it is their parents who were spatially displaced, and the legacy of nostalgia for the country of origin lives on in the second generation. . . . The desire to "return" stems from layers of second-generation experience, many of them imbued with emotional significance, that give rise to wishes to learn more about family history and background, to feel a sense of "belonging," or to resolve conflicting identity issues. (113)

Acknowledging the initiative by the Vietnamese descendants to challenge "[t]his fixation of finally belonging (to a nation or a community) (211), Ha also points to the possibility of a third space, "the simultaneity of feeling "American" but also desiring to "belong" in

Viet Nam” (213). The hybrid stance in this definition also implies the ongoing negotiation of belonging for the Vietnamese refugees as a result of temporal and spatial dislocation and Kristeva’s subject-in-process. Seeking home and reconsidering it in the historical framework stand for a search for being secure in a physical place. Nonetheless, a movement away from this designated sense and place allows for a dynamic process that liberates the individual from taken-for-granted assumptions and the so-called realities produced by the nations.

Returning to the idea of national abjection of Vietnamese history and filial debt, Cherry’s initial thought of home as a place where one lives with the family reinforces “the ideas of fixity, boundedness, and nostalgic exclusivity traditionally implied by the word home” (Walters xvi). Yet, the children of Vietnamese Americans as refugees and survivors, are inevitably caught up with the dilemmas of their dual identities: as Vietnamese and Americans. Their struggle to find a sense of belonging is characterized by a state of limbo and a process of “straddling two social worlds” (Bankston and Zhou 2). As Bankston and Zhou note, “[a]t home or within their ethnic community, they hear that they must work hard and do well at school in order to move up; on the street they often learn a different lesson, that of rebellion against authority and rejection of the goals of achievement” (2).

Whether Vietnamese Americans who return to Viet Nam are treated as foes or friends fundamentally impacts their sense of who they are and influences the production of their stories. The same holds true when Vietnamese Americans encounter violence in America, either inside or outside their homes. Identities are shaped by how we are looked at and treated by others. (Pelaud 136-137)

Cherry’s condition, could be explained in this context of generational conflict in Vietnamese families, arising out of the clash of values and perspectives in contemporary Vietnamese American society. Despite their firm rejection of any ties or attachment with Vietnam in the sense of a physical connection, the first-generation Vietnamese also display a contradictory attitude towards their home country. They have a symbolic relation to their homeland, an attitude moving between a cultural preservation and disowning. However, a deeper analysis reveals that the younger generation Vietnamese still have to confront and deal with the consequences of poorly managed displacement processes and their lifelong effects on their parents. In this effort to survive and live,

Vietnamese people have to rationalize the past while choosing silence as a protective shield.

While Vietnam, as a point of reference and physical setting, constitutes a critical terrain for affective negotiations of answers regarding her personal and collective history, it also implicates an abject history for her Vietnamese refugee family as is in the American national imaginary. For the family, particularly Tuyet, Vietnam is an abject place where Cherry's refugee family distances themselves from all the pain and secrets. Moreover, pursuing a closer connection with the homeland poses a threat to the life that has been rebuilt within the new national boundaries of the US.

As a second-generation Vietnamese, Cherry feels American in the beginning of the novel. However, her journey to Vietnam and France to visit her grandparents on her father's side also triggers the realization of Cherry's "own captivity and reeducation in family matters related to life, love, and loss" (Bui 75). Cherry's exceptional memory, ability to remember details in precision is a hint for her role in unlocking family memory for communication. As Pierre Nora writes, "The quest for memory is the search for one's history" (13). Nevertheless, the partially revealed secrets of the past push her to a "reeducation" process regarding her sense of being in America while her ancestral homeland provides a ground for her to search for the answers. On her last return to Vietnam with a bunch of read and unread letters belonging to her mother and grandpère, she thinks she could make sense of her identity by possessing the knowledge hidden in the family history. Although her engagement with the past through homeland empowers her to question her sense of belonging to America, she is caught up in an identity crisis. Yet, her brother, Lum's warning to her to "move on" (Phan 340) suggests that there is no complete freedom from the weight of the past presiding over people's lives and no way to attain a stable sense of identity (Bui 94). Tracing her belonging in Vietnam represents her potential to destabilize the fixation of belonging to a nation in the journey towards home.

2.4. CONCLUSION

In *Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, silence and memory are major issues. The survivor generation mostly prefers silence regarding the past as a defense mechanism. The women of the Vos and Truong families who experience the negatives sides of this collective attitude more than the men are the ones who break the silence to show the wrongdoings to themselves by the Western governments. The problem with the past is not limited to outer forces, but also the Vietnamese themselves who betray each other. Critical refugee studies conceptualizes the refugees as producers of knowledge. As a younger generation Vietnamese author, Aimee Phan illustrates different aspects of Vietnamese experience through her refugee characters. With their vices and mistakes, the members of Truong and Vos family experience occasional lack of control during their displacement process. At this point, it is important to consider the complexity of refugee lives and “their own need for livability, safety, and dignity” as CRS scholars emphasizes (*Departures* 77). Still, as Vietnamese refugees, they determine the direction and course of their lives in contrast to their portrayal as abject objects of rescue.

Exploring the consequences of the past decisions is done by the younger generation Cherry, who has difficulty in balancing out her parents’ wishes and her priorities. The “strategic forgetting”—phrased by Viet Than Nguyen—by the elders and unanswered questions causes Cherry to get into an existential crisis. To resolve struggle with identity, Cherry travels to France and Vietnam to talk with her brother and paternal relatives. Her journey is important in terms of realizing her national abject Vietnamese identity that passes onto them through the generations. Cherry’s recognition of her abject foreignness to her roots triggers her to go after abject-defied family memories. Her case exemplifies the younger generation’s questioning stance against historical erasure by the US government.

Correspondingly, migration, refugee camp, and resettlement processes of the Truong and Vo’s families in the novel point to national and personal abjection of the refugee body. The abjection of the Vietnamese refugee woman in the abject space of refugee camp is a central aspect of this. Trinh, one of Cherry’s aunts, endures constant rape by the

Malaysian guards in order to survive and protect her son before they leave for France. Ambiguity as a political tool is embodied in the transient nature of the camp which holds the refugee body in a precarious situation. The refugee woman is the most influenced by this vulnerability. Trinh's revelation of her abuse to her family members is a critical step for addressing multi-dimensional forms of abjection inflicted through familial and political neglect of women in refugee camps. Furthermore, Phan portrays different mother types, from subservient to breadwinners, which exemplify the strategic nature of motherhood. The active role of women in decision-making, as well as the times they have to exhibit mental and physical endurance during the encampment and resettlement reveal many forms of challenges they go through as forcibly displaced. Sacrifice and silence as situational and cultural forces during the war, followed by speaking out and rebellion in resettlement characterize these women's relationships with the nuclear and extended family while it marks their claim for agency and determination against gender-bound expectations and politically-driven pressures. Cherry's travelling to Vietnam, as a younger generation Vietnamese, in opposition to her mother's wish displays the changing identity and family dynamics in Vietnamese families.

As the next chapter will illustrate, pursuing these neglected histories to gain an understanding of the survival skills employed by the previous generation is important for two reasons. First, it reveals the irreparable outcomes the past policies caused in line with CRS premises. Second, the exploration of past is critical for the future Vietnamese generations who benefit from the abject power of history to come to terms with their abject identities.

CHAPTER 3

LIVING WITH THE PAST: *THE LOTUS AND THE STORM*

Considered a “pioneer” in Vietnamese diasporic literature, Lan Cao is one of the first Vietnamese Americans who writes about the remnants of South Vietnam in English (Tam 42). Mai, as the protagonist of Cao’s two novels *The Monkey Bridge* (2007) and *The Lotus and The Storm* (2014) features many resonances with the writer’s life experience as a Vietnamese refugee. As the daughter of a high-ranking military officer in Vietnam, Cao left Vietnam a few months before the war ended in 1975. Leaving a place, however, does not necessarily bring a complete disengagement with the homeland, especially if one has to leave it to survive and leave the loved ones behind. Likewise, Cao acknowledges the continuity of the past in the present by showcasing the characters still negotiating that past in their lives. *The Lotus and The Storm* mainly centers around a Vietnamese American family whose life is shattered by the Vietnam War. According to Quan Manh Ha, Cao’s book “challenges the American concept of successful assimilation, provided that a refugee or immigrant comes to the United States and forgets the past to build a brighter future” (21).

The Lotus and The Storm projects the continuing impact of the Vietnam War on Vietnamese refugees in displacement. Talking about the remnants of the past, Vinh Nguyen elaborates on the persistence of past events structuring daily life in the present: “The refugee past punctures the resident present” (109). Moreover, writing on the inevitability and ethics of remembering, Viet T. Nguyen says, “The Vietnam War remains a timely example of dealing with memory and its ethical challenges, beginning with how the war’s enduring half-life in memory continues” (“Just Memory” 8). In other words, the end of the war does not mark an end in the refugee psyche. According to Khatharya Um, who writes on the memory of the survivor, “for many survivors, the trauma is not only in what they lived through but also in what they live with” (*Land of Shadows* 196). Within the context of war, the traumatic loss and separation distress, whether on personal or national levels, holds importance in interpreting present-day and memories, considering the “simultaneity of present and past” in refugee narratives.

In *The Lotus and The Storm*, when the communist forces took control in South Vietnam, Mai and Minh came to the US through Operation Babylift in 1975, leaving Quy, the mother in Vietnam. The narrative structure alternates between the father and daughter's lives in Vietnam throughout the 1960s and 1970s and almost forty years later in 2006 in Virginia. Mai, a law graduate librarian, lives with her father, Minh, a former South Vietnamese soldier. He is now an aging man who has PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), and his aging experience concurs with ongoing negotiation with the war memories as a refugee. Losing their loved ones, such as Quy, his wife, and Khanh, his daughter, Mr. Minh feels preoccupied with the grief regarding his losses and goes through a process of reckoning not only with the past events as a soldier but also past-life connections as a husband, father, and friend.

For Mai, her experience of war trauma as a child is also compounded by the loss of her sister, her friend, and her mother. She has a fractured identity and struggles with being caught up with her "Vietnamese" and "Americanized" selves. On one hand, she wants an ordinary life as a resettled individual with a stable job, far from the mental turmoil of memories. On the other, her unassimilated-child self refuses to be suppressed and disrupts her daily life with untimely crisis moments that cause her to experience a disconnection from her body and surroundings. Her uncanny experience of split personality is rooted in her childhood when her sister is shot dead in the car beside her. In this respect, Cao's novel displays "not only the experience of displacement and exile but also the experience of trauma" in the refugee experience (Satterlee 3).

Consequently, the intersecting personal and historical implications render it impossible for the displaced Vietnamese to go unnoticed in the larger body of work on the Vietnam War history. The younger generation leads the way to deal with the unresolved issues in relation to family, identity and community, whether it is to confront, alleviate guilt, hope for healing or open the past into discussion. Recalling YẾN LÊ Espiritu's emphasis on reading and offering refugee narratives through Vietnamese perspectives, this chapter focuses on the effects of the US military intervention in Vietnam through the lens of a former South Vietnamese soldier and his 1.25 generation Vietnamese daughter. One

prevalent and prominent element in the father and daughter's narration is the abject force of the haunting past in the present and their struggle to have a stable mindset as refugees. They both suffer from personal and collective trauma. Therefore, *The Lotus and The Storm* exposes the inside story of the war in which the US does not concede defeat.

In the face of the reputational damage to its rescuer role, the US media, Espiritu claims, offered "the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees" as a "substitute" and deployed the refugee figure to turn the failure in Vietnam into "a just and successful war" ("The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose'" 329). In this representation, Vietnamese refugees are "the natural byproduct of regional conflicts and undeveloped economies that appeared to have little to do with Western interests in the region, then or now" (Espiritu "Toward a Critical Refugee" 423). Cao's and other writers' works in this dissertation illustrate that these refugees are ordinary human beings until their civilian lives are devastated by the chaos of the war. Yet, the use of the refugees as "instruments" of politics on the benefit of Western countries corresponds to another form of racial control in the aftermath of the war.

In the novel, the continuing effects of the irretrievable losses such as family and country haunt Mai and Minh to the extent that negotiation with the past becomes inescapable for them. Trauma comes forward since their family relationship has completely changed after many traumatic events including the death of Khanh. Trauma in literature functions as a "social and cultural discourse that emerges in response to demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events" (Cvetkovich 18). As it is seen in Mai and Minh's case, leaving Vietnam does not erase the enduring consequences of the war. Nevertheless, recognizing trauma and tracing hidden histories provide them an opportunity to come to terms with their abject family story and identity in personal and national levels.

Compared to Cherry, Mai's relationship with Vietnam is more difficult since she is a refugee child who experiences loss in many forms. She loses a sister, her mother, and her homeland. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe mentions that an exploration of Asian America culture and history

shifts and marks alternatives to the national terrain by occupying other spaces, imagining different narratives and critical historiographies, and enacting practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state. (29)

In Cao's narrative, a similar kind of questioning enables reading Vietnamese refugee experience through multiple aspects, including South Vietnamese masculinity, the significance of ethnic enclaves as a form of survival and the struggle of identity for the younger generation Vietnamese.

This chapter will argue that an exploration of South Vietnamese masculinity reveals the mechanisms of abject power. It provides a background to subvert the US presentation of itself as benevolent rescuer while the US presence in Vietnam intensifies the humanitarian crisis itself in the first place. As Espiritu writes, "it is this history of the US exercise of global power in Asia—and not innate Vietnamese abilities and values—that shapes the terms on which the Vietnamese enter and become integrated into the United States" (Espiritu "Toward a Critical Refugee" 423-424). Moreover, for the displaced Vietnamese in America, Isabel Thuy Pelaud states that their experience "in invisible racial and ethnic hierarchy located somewhere between whites and black and below Japanese and Chinese Americans" (qtd. in 15-16). It is safe to assume that a similar logic of racial hierarchy is observed during the war in South Vietnam as South Vietnamese soldiers are rendered ineffectual as they are excluded from taking critical decisions regarding the course of the war. Moreover, a look at the ethnic enclaves is important in terms of examining the after processes of displacement in the host country. As a place illustrating the agency of the dispersed refugee to reestablish their community in a hostile society as national abject subjects, the Little Saigon(s) also illustrates the racism and precarious circumstances Vietnamese refugees are exposed to and try to overcome.

Besides exposing the lingering effects of war, Mai's traumatized identity offers a reading of the Vietnamese subject who goes through the violence of the war as a child. In the face of the trauma of death, her identity is threatened and the impaired boundaries of her identity pushes her to develop an abject identity that ends up in an emergence of unstable and insecure self. Her divided identity is very much related to trauma as much as her mother's absent presence which is furthered by the forced migration. Unlike Cherry who

later realizes her foreignness to her Vietnamese self, Mai is aware and willful of her estrangement to break free from the unresolved grief of the past. However, her return to Vietnam to take her father's ashes leads her to realize a confrontation and acknowledgement of the past is necessary for her healing and reconciliation. Her constant struggle with identity illustrates a point made by Andrew Lam—a prolific Vietnamese author—who says “identities are not fixed in stone, and that after having gone through epic losses one also gains something as well, and new ways of looking at one's self in place of history” (Brada-Williams 7).

3.1. ABJECTION OF SOUTH VIETNAMESE MASCULINITY

Nearly after thirty years they leave Vietnam, Minh and Mai live in an apartment building “Sleepy Hollow Manor” in Virginia. Likewise, although almost thirty years have passed since the US withdrew from Vietnam, the news related to the American occupation in Iraq triggers Minh's traumatic memories as an aging Vietnamese refugee in America who still carries resentment and bitterness related to the past. He states, “1975 is still here, held to enormous scale inside me” (Cao 24). As a former airborne officer, Minh struggles with the physical and psychological consequences of the war since the loss of homeland, a child, and wife. Unresolved past issues are linked to his decisions on both the personal and national levels.

In this regard, the scene where he watches the Iraqi War news at the beginning of Cao's novel is important in opening the past into discussion and providing a firsthand account of a former South Vietnamese Armed Forces soldier who had witnessed his country's gradual fall into chaos and the Communist forces. Watching the debates on TV whether to pull out the military forces from Iraq, Minh reflects on the lasting impact of the war on the Vietnamese refugee, saying “It is now 2006. The year hardly matters. Why would it be different now? They continue to cartwheel from one disposable country to the next, saving the masses and abandoning them” (Cao 24). The resentment in his tone in the face of abandonment can be observed throughout the novel. His disappointment is related not only to the military relations between the US and South Vietnam, but also to his family and friend relationships.

In 1991, President George W. Bush heralded the military success in the Gulf War saying, “By God we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all” (Dionne Jr). In other words, Bush’s statement is presented by the American media as a cure for the American defeat in Vietnam with a military objective having been achieved in Iraq (Espiritu *Body Counts* 84). Pelaud explains the “Vietnam Syndrome” as a negative impact “on foreign policy of a national sense of guilt for having gone to war under false pretenses and having inflicted harm on so many civilians” (15). The president’s declaration can be taken as a herald of the onset of new initiations to recuperate the damaged national pride, as much as it could also be interpreted as a delayed acknowledgement of failure in Vietnam.

In *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Susan Jeffords points to the artistic and historical narrations of the Vietnam War in America through a gendered lens. Emphasizing the connection between warfare and gender, she states “[g]ender is the matrix through which Vietnam is read, interpreted, and reframed in dominant American culture” (53). Similarly, for the American government, the withdrawal from Vietnam will damage the US global image in the eyes of its allies in terms of failing to defend its international concerns and interests (Herring, “America and Vietnam” 109). Elaborating on the various reasons of America’s military involvement in Vietnam, Frederick Logevall claims, President Johnson “saw the war as a test of his own manliness” (393).²⁷ In other words, the aggressive attitude of Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon governments toward the conflict in Vietnam was closely related to “the equation of manhood with support of American war effort” (Kimmel 195). Ideal masculinity at the time was associated with warfare and aggression since a conciliatory attitude can come to mean seemingly “soft on communism” (Kimmel 195). Taking this argument further, Fredrik Logevall argues that the US decision to withdraw or continue war in Vietnam has a domestic connotation that could be extended to personal concerns of the Democratic Party politicians (xvi). To them, finding a diplomatic solution to the war at the time would “expose themselves to a potential humiliation and to threaten their careers” (Logevall 389). As a result, military aggression was prioritized in order to secure the US government’s geopolitical hegemony in Southeast Asia against the Communist forces and

²⁷ As Kimmel mentions the loss of confidence in a type of masculinity relies on military virtues in Vietnam incorporates only a part of the problem American men have at the time (196). Therefore, the crisis of masculinity cannot be shown as the sole cause of violence in Vietnam.

also to preserve American hegemonic masculinity (Espiritu, (“The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’” 337). The novel offers a perspective on the building of national identity through an insecurity regarding the American masculine identity.

Within this context, the abject process of the Vietnam War and its afterwards unveil an insecurity related to American manhood with the contribution of the ongoing conflicts at home at the time.²⁸ Using Melani McAlister’s phrasing “failure of will, sexual failure, and . . . military failure” to refer to America’s treatment of the Vietnam War, YẾN Lê Espiritu underlines that “[t]he defeat in Vietnam battered U.S. masculinity” (“The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’” 334). Moreover, as she continues, the position of Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese refugees “as the purported rescuers and rescued respectively, they together reposition the United States and its (white male) citizens as the saviors of Vietnam’s “runaways,” and thus as the ultimate victor of the Vietnam War” (Espiritu, (“The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’” 330).

Besides this misrepresentation, a “hyper-focus on the refugees’ needs and neediness” renders ““un-visible’ other important facets of Vietnamese personhood: their self-identity, their dreams for themselves, their hopes for their children, and their “ground of being” (Espiritu, “Vietnamese Masculinities” 88). Therefore, instead of Vietnamese representations by others, the attention should be directed on “how Vietnamese have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves” (88). In this regard, Minh, as a South Vietnamese soldier, father, and husband represents the oppression and subordination of the South Vietnamese masculine subjectivity, who are left out of the will and autonomy to govern a war of their own and protect their family. The failed struggle of hegemony by the American government turns them into “fleeing refugees, boat people, and state-sponsored asylees” (Espiritu, “Vietnamese Masculinities” 92). For her,

The defeat of South Vietnam battered Vietnamese masculinity. . . [a]s a people without their quê hương, Vietnamese refugee men in the United States, cast by the media as incapacitated and demoralized objects of rescue, often found themselves at the mercy of white men who had been (re)positioned

²⁸ American manhood is already challenged by the social movements of the 1960s and 70s that brought a prominent social and political change in American history. Moreover, the tension between pro-and anti-war groups at home regarding the course of the war became, as Michael Kimmel puts it “a central expression of the growing crisis of masculinity” (Kimmel 193).

from defeated foes or allies to valiant rescuers of fleeing Vietnamese. (Espiritu, “Vietnamese Masculinities” 92)

Thus, the misrepresentation of Vietnam veterans and Vietnam refugees through “the we-win-even-when-we-lose syndrome” or the announcement of overcoming the Vietnam Syndrome point to the effort to restore the ontological wound due to the failure in Vietnam on the one hand. It reveals a process in which American men try to overcome their masculinity crisis by abjecting the Vietnamese men during the war. Starting from the war they are positioned under the influence of American hegemonic masculinity through military power. As Hal Foster underlines, in Kristeva’s account, “to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations” (114). For the US military, the ultimate aim in Vietnam was to establish and maintain its power and dominance in the Asian continent by defeating communism and all the forces related to it. As mentioned, Vietnam, as a part of Asia is already a national abject entity in American imagination. The South Vietnamese government which tries to exert its own sovereignty against the Communist North as an American ally also symbolizes the prospect of defeat and transgression. As Kristeva writes, the abject is what “disrupts identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (*Powers of Horror* 4). Therefore, the political instability positions Vietnam as an abject to the US in the first place, particularly for the risk of communism taking over the country.

In broader terms, a hegemonic exercise of power occurs through the military in the territory of Vietnam, that is cast as the national abject as a part of Asia.²⁹ The American government conducts a heavy bombing over the country’s communist counterpart thus interfering in South Vietnam’s internal affairs. Similarly, the coup plot against President Diem—that according to Minh marks the downfall of the country—is one of those acts of “expelling” the threat of the politically abject body endangering the US national interest. Thus, Vietnam provides a space for enforcing American hegemonic masculinity on the Vietnamese man through a strategic deployment of warfare and creating a bondage to American military forces. In his exploration of “what makes hegemonic masculinity

²⁹ Although Karen Shimakawa’s theorization of national abjection mostly talks about the history of Asian people in the US, it is used here to explain as a background of historical conditioning.

hegemonic,” Takeyuki Tsuda lists the key aspects as “pervasiveness, consent, and concealed power” (3). The notion of “hegemonic masculinity” is usually associated with the heterosexual white male as it is the dominant group in the US (Connell, *Masculinities* 78). When comparing various masculinities in this context, James W. Messerschmidt and Michael A. Messner garner attention to the fact that definition and nature of manhood are subject to evolution and the definition of hegemonic masculinity can no longer be reduced to subordination of women but also can be extended to explain the domination of the subordinate, ethnic minority men (38).

In Cao’s novel, it is seen that hegemonic masculinity works through both including and excluding the Southern Vietnamese soldiers from the decision-making processes while rendering the government and its officials dysfunctional during the war. The process corresponds to the workings of abjection that started in Vietnam territory. For the South Vietnamese, as represented by Minh, it is a dilemma between complying and resisting to the fragile boundaries of loyalty and betrayal as the abject side, to subvert those ineffectual power positions through his constant effort as soldier, husband, father, and friend. Minh’s family and friendly relationships represent the entanglement of personal and national predicaments in the face of denial and deception as a survival mechanism. Throughout the novel, it is seen that there is a constant effort to come to terms with the slippery ground of patriotism, or loyalty, and betrayal in Minh’s life in a personal and national sense.

Accordingly, the war and the years before and after it, display political, personal and sociological dynamics that are in conflict with each other. Reading the affair between Quy and John Clifford—an American military advisor who becomes a family friend later—through as a political allegory of Vietnam “the US involvement in the RVN,” Hao Jun Tam sees the triangle relationship among Minh, Quy, and Cliff as emblematic of “South Vietnam’s nation-building collaboration with the US government” (69). Arguing that Minh condones his wife’s relationship with Cliff, Tam writes that Minh approves of their “open marriage with an American” (71). He further continues, “[t]his modern family, therefore, expresses the complex effect of South Vietnam’s nation-building collaboration with the US government, in which happy smiles disguise deep distrust”

(69). Thus, a symbolic reading of the abjection of South Vietnamese masculinity as a way of enforcing and sustaining hegemony through military strategies and implicit relationships presents the larger relationship between the US and Vietnam, and South Vietnam which on the surface is an ally.

Through flashbacks, Mr. Minh and Mai recount their life in Vietnam which, in the beginning, is very serene while the war is in the background. As Mai remembers from her childhood memories: “He is away from home most of the time because there is a war going on and he has to fight in it” (Cao 6). Although traditional view of gender based on Confucianism may hold true for the majority, it is seen that Mai’s family features a more modern family type as Mai’s mother, Quy is portrayed as a successful business woman, being “in charge of our [their] family’s finances” (Cao 4). The beautiful family picture, however, starts to dissolve with the events starting with the assassination of president Ngo Dinh Diem by the initiative of the US government, and the death of their older child Khanh. These are two turning points in Minh’s family and Vietnam’s national history that incite a series of events illustrating how the war causes the destruction of family and nation.

Regarding Vietnamese masculinities, An et al. state that Confucianism is a determining factor shaping traditional Vietnamese manhood that assigns Vietnamese men “a privileged, powerful and dominant social status over women in their family and broader communities” (4). As an “errant son from a distant land,” Minh achieves a powerful position through his position in the army while his marriage with Quy empowers him both emotionally and financially (Cao 26). Nevertheless, the emasculation of Asian men in the US through various legal laws and social practices throughout their history has its reflections during the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese men were portrayed as perpetrators of “random and senseless” violence (Chong 95). Yet, in Cao’s novel, it is seen that Vietnamese men are tested on many grounds including family and nation. The violence of war affects adversely their authority both in terms of the cultural and political context and their Vietnamese American masculine subjectivity as a soldier. At this point, the novel presents the intersectionality of desire for political hegemony and the will of proving manhood in the Vietnam War. Minh as a former South Vietnamese soldier

seeking reconciliation, Cliff as an American veteran, unaware of the psychological damage he left behind in Vietnam, and Phong as a North Vietnamese spy, seeking forgiveness represent a different aspect of the intertwined national relations that are embodied in the personal relations among them. In this sense, *The Lotus and The Storm* displays different masculinities fighting within and against each other over the relation between manhood and nationalism. In this equation, American masculinity aims “to jettison and expel” and even ignore Vietnam masculine agency to maintain hegemony at national and personal levels.

To Minh, the assassination of president Ngo Dinh Diem by the initiative of the US government and the events afterward are critical in determining the fate of the nation and Vietnamese people. He refers to the criticality of the event in the downfall of the country stating, “One November day, our collective fate would be redirected. After that, everything faltered and changed” (27). The Diem coup and the Buddhist crisis at the time seem to arise from the clashes between the Buddhist groups and the government as the President tries to build a nationalist identity “over religious autonomy” (Cao 29). However, the protests to support Buddhist monks by the Vietnamese society led to the eruption of violence and chaos. The chaos resulted in the coup d’état against the president by the Revolutionary Military Council, including the close friends from the president’s inner circle, who also blamed him for “the fake anti-Communist policy” that “was aimed not at winning but at engaging in an illicit peace dialogue with the enemy” (Cao 35).

As Geoffrey Warner writes, the Diem coup was backed up by Kennedy administration who feared that the existing collaboration with the Ngo Dinh Diem government that was based on mutual interests would accelerate the Communist takeover instead of preventing it (245). The political instability within the country and noncompromising attitude with the Buddhists who are perceived as a “threat” by the American government led to an intervention and overthrow of the South Vietnamese government. The ambiguity as a characteristic of abject leads to both an attraction and repulsion in the subject. Minh listens the South Vietnamese media in the aftermath and says:

The emphasis was on change but also continuity. A new prime minister would be appointed. The country would embark on a strong, steady, newly charted

course. Corruption and authoritarianism would be yesterday's problems. The Revolutionary Military Council had seized power to build a strong regime and to terminate the fake anti-Communist policy of the prior government, which was aimed not at winning but at engaging in an illicit peace dialogue with the enemy. And to top it off, the new regime, the announcer assured, had also been promised continued American support. (Cao 35)

Importantly, the details also embody "a dreadful truth" regarding the US involvement in the coup (35). According to Minh, "American support for the coup had been secured not after its success but before its attempt" (Cao 35). As Minh points out it is no coincidence that at that time the Southern government is trying to "forge a common identity and a sense of duty to the nation" (Cao 28). It is seen that the American government's fight for hegemony and fight against Communism occur through creating more chaos, intervening under the guise of support. In a later scene where Minh speaks to Cliff about the coup, he mentions the President's intention to "to cut short American involvement" in the country before the coup (Cao 116).

In this respect, Cao's narrative and Minh's version of the coup enable an alternative to the master narratives of the Vietnam War by challenging its narration by the American government "as a noble and moral mission in defense of freedom and democracy" while it is "an attempt to secure U.S. geopolitical hegemony in Southeast Asia, and by extension, in Asia" (Espiritu "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose'" 337). Thus, an attempt to break away with the US can be conceived as an attempt to transgress the national narratives as national abjects that the US, presenting itself as "arbiter of humanity," cannot accept. The coup over a collaboration with some of the South Vietnamese generals, is to solidify its power in the national and global scene, rather than an altruistic act, achieved through both empowering and disqualifying the South Vietnamese government: "I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 2-3). George Herring summarizes the unforeseen results of the so-called "coup solution:"

Kennedy and his advisers eventually solved the problem by authorizing the ill-fated coup that brought the deaths of Diem and Nhu. As some U.S. officials had predicted, however, the "solution" produced greater problems. The demise of Diem left a vacuum that the United States itself would have to fill. Americans were probably relieved to take over the war rather than continue to work through a feckless and intractable ally. But the pervasive

Americanization of the war that took place in 1965 produced a whole new set of problems and a more complex and ultimately equally fateful relationship with the South Vietnamese. (3)

The coup marks a never-ending political turbulence in Vietnam. Mimi Nguyen mentions “freedom as a force, one that can indeed humiliate and exclude but also embrace and inspire” (4). Minh as a loyal soldier of the Diem government is one of those who is imprisoned. The gloomy trajectory of the country inevitably affects Minh’s life profoundly, including his relationship with his close friend and coworker, Phong who is also close to the family. A northern Vietnamese working in the Southern army, Phong turns out to be a Vietcong.

During the coup, when Minh sees Phong taking part in the coup as one of the organizers, he faces a moral dilemma that deeply confounds him as a friend and coworker: “The coup did change everything, even a long-standing friendship” (Cao 85). Although Phong saves his life for Minh being a coup opponent, Minh’s internal conflict and loss of trust complicate their friendship for the rest of his life. The fact that Minh is actually saved due to Quy’s deal with Phong represents the conflict between two masculinities of the same nation over a desire to own power. In other words, Quy as an emblem of Vietnam, is the ground over which various types of masculinities contest, including American, South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese (solved through the female body that seems to be pose the real threat in the first place in Kristeva’s account). He curses Phong for his involvement and for letting himself be used as a pawn to enforce the coup while Phong, calling himself “the nationalist,” accuses Minh of his passivity about the heightening tension under President Diem (Cao 87).

Cynthia Enloe states that nationalisms “typically ha[ve] sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope” (93). At this point, it can be said that patriotism becomes a test of manliness for the revolutionists while it links back to the fragility of the binary logic of loyalty and betrayal. A new government that overthrows the authority of the former with the powerful support of American government has seemed promising to them at least for a while. The coup that planted the seeds of distrust among the military also brought paranoia afterward as the junta generals

started to fear having a similar fate with president Diem who they destroyed violently. Moreover, the fact that Phong is not even a faithful soldier of the South Vietnamese displays the elusiveness and fragility of those ideological constructions that are proffered to be a measure of patriotism. The adoption and enforcement of such ideology by Phong equals to a “demand for blind patriotism” which “constituted a method of social control for the benefit of a small cadre” rather than the nation itself (Tran Nguyen, *Becoming* 95).

The issue of “loyalty and betrayal” pervades Minh’s family life both in terms of being a husband and soldier as he is caught in the clash of morality and obligations. Quy’s family dynamics harm their marriage. Uncomfortable with his wife’s contact with her brother, who is a Vietcong (Uncle Number Five), and his occasional visits to their house, Minh, as a soldier defines their dilemma by saying, “[h]is presence represents the complications of family and signals the confluence of loyalty and betrayal” (45). Minh has to help release his brother-in-law when his airborne unit captures him, Minh’s family values outweigh the national benefits. He sums up the tricky combination of “loyalty and betrayal” as he is numbly watching his brother-in-law coming out of the cell: “Me and mine instead of the greater good. I was doing what was needed to be done for the family” (173). His predicament points to the wartime exceptionality that forces people to make compromises to prevent further loss and grief, even in a family circle. Still, Minh wrestles with the conflicting thoughts of having “failed” and not being “loyal to both the army and [his] wife” (172).

For the male subject, making concessions may come to mean a wound in his manliness as it is assumed to be tested on the ability to protect those he is responsible for as a father and soldier. However, Minh’s family obligation—shaken by his daughter’s death—compels him to prioritize his family members although it contradicts with his values as a military officer. As he conveys,

The Vietnamese have a belief that lies at the very core of our being. Family comes first. This is our lethal truth and its dull slog. *Ruot thit*, innards and flesh, we would say. True loyalty, true complicity, lies there, among the intimacies of persons, families, and friends. We do not in our hearts consider it corrupt to favor family and friends over strangers. It is not marvelous to be law-abiding. It is marvelous to be loyal. (Cao 172)

Yet, the destruction of the family, of utter importance to the Vietnamese, seems to be the inevitable consequence of the Vietnam War. Despite his present-day silhouette that evokes a “[b]ag of bones” (17), Minh is portrayed as a powerful soldier once, who is “fighting in a terrible war” and “a paratrooper who jumped out of planes” (Cao 7). However, losing one of their children during an assassination targeting him, Quy and Minh experience a disruption in their marriage with the profound grief and Quy’s blaming attitude towards Minh. His noncompliance as a soldier makes Minh a target and he is stripped of the capacity to protect his family, and their daughter in particular.

Khanh’s death reinforces Minh’s abjection not only by impairing his ability to protect her as a soldier and father, but also as the traumatic experience of witnessing his daughter’s death brings Minh closer to his own fragility as a human being, because of “death infecting life” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4). In this sense, a confrontation with his own abjection leads to an acceptance of Quy’s shaken faith in Minh’s power as a husband and father. Already traumatized by her father’s death by the Vietcong, Quy goes through a long grieving process that negatively affects her relationship with her husband and daughter Mai. He says,

I knew we were no longer at a place in our lives where anything was possible, where the future was still to be lived raucously, riotously. Rather, we were hemmed in by the failures of the past, and any future we could still make for ourselves would have to carry the burden of the past lives. I understood. Quy’s attention did not have to be on me alone. As long as she was all right, I knew that I would be too. (Cao 170)

With a complete awareness of the fragility of his wife’s emotional well-being and that nothing will be the same again, Minh acknowledges the irreversible impacts of critical events he has no control over. Quy first engages in an affair with Phong to save Minh, “us[ing] his[Phong’s] influence with the coup leaders,” and later another with Cliff—an American soldier who is also a family friend—to arrange Minh and Mai’s escape from Vietnam (Cao 348). When Phong visits Minh in America years later for reconciliation, he reveals that Quy died in the South China Sea after the pirates raped her while they were trying to flee Vietnam by boat with Phong and her brother.

The relationship between Minh, Quy, and John Clifford, who is recruited to go to Vietnam as an American military advisor, also illustrates the inevitability of circumstantial complicity of the South Vietnamese subject and offers a personal and historical reckoning. At this point, his exploration of the past is closely tied to the exercising of American hegemonic masculinity through military intervention and manifesting itself as a romantic power on the Vietnamese woman. Their deteriorating relationship with Quy and Minh's portrayal of American management of the war while keeping them nearby prove this implication. Within a short time, they become close family friends with Cliff. Minh feels closer to him due to Cliff's "willingness to listen" in contrast to other American advisors (Cao 115). Furthermore, Cliff's familiarity with Vietnam history impresses Quy who shows a particular care hosting him:

He was already adapted to our habits of eating and drinking. Still, my wife made sure we served only cooked vegetables and beef, well done. We excluded one of my favorites, green papaya salad, because it was raw. Our water, my wife decided, should be just fine even for an American. It was always boiled first, left to cool, and then filtered. Still, when we were seated at the table, I was surprised to see bottled water instead. In the center tray was an impressive mound of appetizers—spring rolls, grilled lemongrass beef wrapped in grape leaves, crab claws fried with a dash of salt and pepper. (Cao 118)

Quy's attitude can be interpreted as a general appreciation of the cultural influence of American hegemony whether it be conscious or unconscious. Spending a great deal of time with the family, Cliff and Minh's families become very close. Cliff saves Minh's life when he gets wounded during their operation at the Cambodian border. However, her affair with Cliff can be read as an aspiration for the American hegemonic masculinity, presented to epitomize the idealized masculine standard especially considering the weakening power of Minh as a soldier. At this point, her infidelity to Minh cannot be only informed by sexual desire but a strategic move that is driven by the hope of being saved, as is the case with the US and South Vietnam partnership (ARVN generals). Likewise, Quy's effort to protect her family at all costs affirms her commitment to her husband. However, this is not to say that the alliance, or the affair in this case, exists outside of betrayal and free will.

In one of their casual conversations related to the US presence in Vietnam, Cliff answers through the friendship analogy saying, “You don’t abandon someone who has been a friend to you at his moment of need” (Cao 120). Cliff’s optimism corresponds to “old-fashioned views of American benevolence,” to use Minh’s phrasing (Cao 221). His commitment to this view, yet, displays the convincing power of hegemonies not only for those who are subjected to it but also for the enforcers: “It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority)” (Connell, *Masculinities* 77).

Moreover, Minh depicts Cliff’s “reckless enthusiasm” for Vietnamese food: “He did not act like someone cast adrift in our country” (115). Considering the importance of food in Vietnamese culture, Cliff’s fondness of Vietnamese food can be read as Vietnam’s being a gustatory abject for the US and it has nothing to do with “hunger.” Desire is connected to “competitor’s [the US’s] stomach capacity, willpower and determination” (Halloran 29). He says, “[Cliff] was in our country not for a one-year tour of duty but to pursue more long-term strategic goals, the details of which were not shared with us” (Cao 114). When the US withdraws from Vietnam, Cliff leaves the country. During his visit to Minh’s funeral years later in America, he confesses to Mai that he was in love with Quy and it turns out he is the father of Amerasian child Quy has in Vietnam. In America, Minh does not respond to Cliff’s efforts to communicate to protect Mai from the baggage of the past and adapt to their new life.

In the scene where Minh is released from prison after the coup, he says, “For every act of betrayal, there is also a simultaneous act of friendship” (34). It might be argued that the nature of the gift, whether it be freedom, friendship, or anything else, shapes Vietnamese lives in accordance with the fragile context of the war. Years later, Minh learns that he is released in return for Quy’s involvement in a relationship with Phong. It confirms Mimi Nguyen’s theorization of the bounded nature of the gift and the debt ties to the receiver who is expected to pay it even if Minh’s freedom comes disguised as a favor by Phong. In the scene where Mai, as a child, realizes the affair between her mother and Phong, she interprets it as reciprocating his help. “We owe him devotion, kindness; in other words, a debt too great to be discharged, one we must wear on our bodies. Mang on indeed—to

wear a debt,' to be cloaked in its immaculate and terrible beauty" (Cao 71). As she continues, "Our mother too wears this debt" (71). Her emphasis on her mother and choice of words as she uses "wear" to qualify the debt to illustrate both the inextricable bond of "debt" as one carries their skin everywhere and the vulnerability of a woman as a war subject. Phong's later marriage proves that Quy is not romantically involved in the relationship but finds herself in a situation that she is simultaneously driven into. In this sense, she repays the corollary of the gift through gender-based exploitation.

Considering these entangled situations induced by the cruel context of the war, it might also be argued that the binary logic of "loyalty and betrayal" resists any rigid classification of approaches to human nature. As Minh maintains, "How fragile the rules of survival were. These were the elemental calculations of loyalty and treachery. He had betrayed the president but has saved me. The poignant incongruity of it all stayed with me" (Cao 34). His statement displays the cost the Vietnamese subject has to pay to survive in a general context. Whether it is their own life, nation, or sometimes their family, they are made to sacrifice or give up their virtues to survive or ensure the survival of their loved ones. For the South Vietnamese, as represented by Minh, it is always forcing those boundaries as the abjected side, to accepting and refusing those ineffectual power positions through his constant effort as soldier, husband, father, and friend. Minh's family and friend relationships represent the entanglement of personal and national predicaments in the face of denial and deception as a survival mechanism. In this context, Vietnamese people are exposed to a loss accompanied by grief, longing, shame, or even gratitude for their survival. However, this does not necessarily mean that their histories are based solely on victimization. In every choice, even if it is a life and death decision, there is an individual agency to protect the others, although women as subjects find themselves making some choices involuntarily such as submitting to abuse as seen in Quy's bargain with Phong.

3.2. ETHNIC ENCLAVES AS A WAY OF “STAYING VIETNAMESE”

In their apartment, “Sleepy Hollow Manor,” which Minh describes as consisting of “an amalgam of transplants displaced and dislocated from the world over,” Minh and Mai live with communities from similar cultural backgrounds (Cao 19). As an elderly and sick man, Mr. Minh receives in-home care from Mrs. An, one of the Vietnamese neighbors living on the same floor when Mai is at work. For Mr. Minh, Mrs. An is his “confidante” apart from providing daily help with his activities such as meals and dressing (200). In the evenings, they “take our usual loping stride into the past, with its pockmarks and scars and occasional shimmery shadows” (83).

Minh’s inability to release the past can be interpreted as the desire of the refugee survivor to mourn the loss itself. For the survivors, “The losses constitute an ever-present absence that punctuates the clutter of reconstructed lives” (Um, *Land of Shadows* 187). Among various losses, losing country and community constitute an important aspect of Vietnamese diaspora. Apart from the dire economic conditions, political circumstances in postwar Vietnam leave no chance for survival, particularly for those officials of the former government. As Cao puts it, “Even as it collapsed, the country continued to be defined by personal vengeance” (*The Lotus* 246).

As the daughter of a high-ranking South Vietnamese soldier, the author Lan Cao reflects on her own refugee experiences, including coming to America as a part of Operation New life right after the war after staying in a refugee center at Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania. Although their journey seems smoother compared to that of the boat people, the context of exit that leads South Vietnamese to flee home, leaving family and society behind, creates a rift with the homeland regarding belonging. Therefore, spatial displacement as one of the outcomes of the American War in Vietnam has come to mean not only a removal from the physicality of home but also an erosion of their social relationality. In other words, the disruption by the war extends to the loss of community and land for the forcibly displaced individuals. The dispossession in material and emotional terms marks the first signs of their social positioning as the national objects.

Losing one's country destroys one's social and communal network while they try to replace what is lost in resettlement through various means, including ethnic enclaves.

The Vietnamese refugee, denied from self-determination during the resettlement processes through dispersal policy creates ways of reasserting their existence and autonomy. In this sense, these reconstructed physical settings and social relationships function as an important component of "staying Vietnamese" as Karin Aguilar-San Juan phrases it. Moreover, ethnic place-making and community building in Vietnamese diaspora are important strategies that display "the multidimensionality, changeability, and sometimes ambiguous nature of Vietnamese-ness;" as well as "render Vietnamese American people as conscious agents of their destinies rather than as passive or traumatized victims of history" (xxvii). Aside from personal or psychological comforts of "staying Vietnamese" for the Vietnamese refugee, these places allow for the opportunities for physical survival through job and housing opportunities. However, As Aguilar-San Juan argues, the ethnic enclaves reveal how the refugees are positioned as outsiders since these communities emerge as a result of being "part of the larger historical process of U.S. racial formations" (xviii-xix). Thus, a reading of Vietnamese experience through place and community can help "expose and dismantle the assumptions behind the narratives of immigrant assimilation and American exceptionalism" (Aguilar-San Juan 156). Establishing ethnic enclaves, such as Little Saigon in the Vietnamese case and rebuilding the social context of the homeland is one such example not only for economic survival but also for preserving the community values and communicating their personal and social needs as abject others.

Displaced, the Vietnamese American refugees are to rebuild their lives according to the government resettlement policies that used the refugees as a good guise to recover from its failure in Vietnam. The American government tries to handle the Vietnamese resettlement process, beginning from the camp space through a forced dispersal policy that is alleged to enable Vietnamese refugees an easy integration and transition period. Mai speaks of the initial policy of dispersal by the American government saying "No one here can leave without receiving an offer from an American pledging responsibility for his well-being. All of us here will soon be scattered across the United States" (253). In

other words, they cannot decide when or where to leave and rebuild their lives. To prevent ethnic concentration, or “sticking together” in certain areas, they are scattered across the country due to the dispersal policy of the US government that finds it as a “formula for the ‘domestication’ and ‘deracination’ of Vietnamese refugees” (Aguilar-San Juan 22). Nevertheless, the policy of dispersal that essentially serves to enforce a planned assimilation process and deal with increasing racist and nativist attitudes within the states indicates that the disregard for the human aspect during the war continues as an intentional overlooking of the critical role of co-ethnic support during the resettlement period.

Sponsored by one of the Catholic churches when Mai is seventeen, Minh and Mai settle in Virginia. Minh cleans a bowling alley while Mai works in a Vietnamese store. In the same vein, they live in an apartment building consisting of “an amalgam of transplants displaced and dislocated from the world over” (19). In this regard, the active dispersal policy is subverted through a secondary internal migration in later processes that enable people to regroup together as it is the case also in the formation of Little Saigon. Having assistance from his daily care, Mrs. An, a Vietnamese boat refugee, nurtures Minh and Mai with “great tenderness and warmth” and becomes more than a caregiver to Minh (Cao 200). Minh sees her as a “confidante” to whom he can confess his past secrets and find comfort in articulating: “I have known her for decades and am comfortable speaking my language with her” (20). Noting his comfort in communicating with someone in his native language, he emphasizes the value of communal support among refugee seniors for their shared war experience.

The cooperation in interpersonal relationships also seems to evolve into intergroup bonds living in the same neighborhood. The intragroup solidarity among those “transplanted” communities allows them to navigate the system that denies them many legal rights (20). Minh depicts the supportive relationships in the apartment saying:

In the evenings, I hear the clash and clangor of Hindi and Tagalog, Korean and Chinese, and of course the familiar and comforting elocution of southern Vietnamese. Much of life spills forth and is conducted outdoors here. Pleasantries and gossip as well as business exchanges and proposals are discussed in the front yard and back garden, on sidewalks and stoops. Women

in saris may work as receptionists or nurses during the day but after hours they double as gold merchants or moneylenders willing to finance under-the-table business for the ambitious—ticket scalping, catering, hairdressing, marriage brokering. At Sleepy Hollow Manor, New World ingenuity combines with Old World desires and networks to spin a furtive, anarchist version of the American Dream. (19)

Notably, his depiction displays both the economic disparities and national exclusion mechanism mainly based on race and class. Those challenges do not deter the minorities, especially women, as emphasized by Minh from looking for alternative ways to navigate in the system. It also includes collaboration to achieve economic and social adaptation in the new land. Nevertheless, Minh's portrayal discloses the contradiction in the representation and reception of the Asian communities, particularly the Vietnamese in two ways. The efforts of women first debunk their needy representation since they are presented to be "helpless victims draining the resources of American tax-paying citizens and the reports of Vietnamese refugees as welfare dependents and nefarious gang members that had begun to proliferate in the media" (Lieu 19). Secondly, it represents their struggle to move through an advanced capitalist society. Although they are not Vietnamese, their struggle presents the larger minority groups who try to overcome a system that denies legitimate progress for them to achieve in the host society.

The above depicted lives of minorities and the relationship between Minh and Mrs. An also point to another major factor in Vietnamese American lives. Minh says, "She has been in this country almost as long as I have but, unlike me, she escaped by boat after the war" (20). Minh's emphasis on Mrs. An's becoming a boat refugee reflects both the downward mobility and the disappearance of the social hierarchies of Vietnamese in diaspora. Therefore, their relationship also illustrates the significance of community support, especially among the refugee seniors in term of making their way through American society.

The construction of ethnic communities is a part of "the healing process" for the Vietnamese who try to overcome the catastrophic results of war and displacement processes as well as a defense mechanism against various forms of racial discrimination due to linguistic, cultural, and economic challenges they have to endure during the

resettlement process (Võ “Constructing” 102). Witnessing the gradual establishment of Little Saigon in Virginia with the increasing Vietnamese in the neighborhood, Mai acknowledges the reparative effect of grouping people by sharing not only homing desire but also painful memories: “A community is being built here. We know what we are. We are the barnacles of a lost war, struggling against disdain. Here we are day by day building this cloistered niche for ourselves and filling it with improvised charm” (Cao 257).

Apart from being the commercial hub and nostalgic place for the Vietnamese, Little Saigon becomes a place to hold private and public events, including ceremonial ritual events such as the Tet festival (Mazumdar 326). Preserving cultural rituals and celebrations in a society that has no place for these kinds of events corresponds to “assert[ing] their place” in American society (Aguilar San-Juan 88). Mai also acknowledges the empowering potential of “place-making” and the role of social support in coping with the loss of the country, stating “It is all about reconstructing and reclaiming what is gone” (Cao 272).

At this point, it is necessary to underline Aguilar San Juan’s notion of “staying Vietnamese” (xxvii). Although the notion of staying Vietnamese evokes “an image of Vietnamese culture and identity that is frozen in time and space” at first glance, Aguilar-San Juan positions it as “a shifting and changeable condition” (xxvi). Her notion reminds one of Kristeva’s notion regarding abject qualifying the “subject in process.” For the first generation, rebuilding a familiar setting in an unfamiliar physical place is a way of reclaiming what is ripped off from them through and after the war. Aside from enabling an atmosphere and space for solidarity and cooperation, the ethnic enclaves reveal the racial and political dynamics that force the abject Vietnamese refugees to figure out alternative ways and mechanisms to survive. Yet, it does not erase the fact that they challenge the promise of assimilation. They develop alternative strategies for their emotional well-beings and attain a life to live and support their families. Forming an ethnic enclave is an expression of community identity and a part of resistance against forceful assimilation processes especially for the first-generation Vietnamese. It is a way of sustaining the unfinished relationship with the homeland that they know they will never return and dealing with their foreigner status.

Likewise, in *The Lotus*, Minh and Mai regularly visit Little Saigon in Virginia, where they get information about home and mitigate their homing desire, especially through Vietnamese food. Mai joins a meal service that delivers home-cooked Vietnamese “comfort food” (21). Broadly speaking, Vietnamese cuisine, a reflection of Vietnamese cultural identity can also be perceived as abject just like Vietnamese subjectivities and other Asian foods. This understanding is again related to the American effort “to maintain its symbolic coherence and constitute pure and exclusive American subject formation” (Zhang 4). However, Mai and Minh capture the soothing emotional state through the food that reminds them of home and it helps them fulfill their nostalgic longing for home molded by grief. As Minh remembers: “Time floats, then curls and curves backward into itself. Coaxed by the lure of memory my mind drifts into an imagined world from years past. The distant chant of an itinerant peddler hawking food swims in my ears. Tamarind pods fall on the misshapen sidewalks, cracked open by the Saigon heat” (Cao 22-23). In this sense, food, which connotes “an essential connection with home” in diaspora creates a refuge for people (Mannur 11).

Nonetheless, cultural and emotional aspects of food, molded by nostalgia and resentment, strengthen the emotional attachment to home. He describes the stimulation of good memories by sounds and smells during one of their visits to the Little Saigon in Virginia:

Leaving behind the hooks and snares of life in this new country, we come here for the comfort of pho noodle soup and other aromas from home. I can almost feel its recuperative powers, the full-throated pleasures promised by the simulation of familiar sights and sounds. Authenticity is not the point. . . . For its nostalgia, the vehement singularity of nostalgia, more than anything else, that brings us here.” (55)

Eliade and Milligan explain it by saying, “Nostalgia for place helps immigrants regain what is lost and retain some semblance of continuity in their lives” (qtd. in Mazumdar 320). Involuntary departure from the homeland creates a restless psyche especially for the first-generation Vietnamese who looks for a refuge, or an anchor to hold on to rejecting the complete erasure of tradition and identity. Thus, the act of replicating particular aspects of home or establishing “continuity with important environments and people of the past” functions as “anchoring” and it is needed for the “emotional well-being” of the older generation (Marcus 88). Replicating those aspects of life and replacing

those eroded community values provides the refugees not only with familiarity but also safety.

In this respect, “staying Vietnamese” is “not an act of constancy but of purposeful, and ultimately strategic, shifting and changing in order to arrive at new ways of being Vietnamese in a U.S. context” (Aguilar-San Juan xxvii). It can be interpreted as an embrace of the abject position by the Vietnamese who celebrate their roots in resettlement thus marking their response toward national abjection. Another example of community-based cooperation is the practice of “hui,” a rotating credit system based on personal trust among Vietnamese refugees in Little Saigon. Since they are not eligible to apply to American banks to take loans, the Vietnamese community uses money from the pot in return for their monthly contributions during the year. Throughout the years, “withdrawals from the hui have been used for” various purposes such as “college education, home renovation, weddings, funerals” (Cao 60). Thus, the transnational dispersion of Vietnamese refugees is tried to be amended through an intracommunity practice that functions to both preserving sociocultural values and “conscious agents of their destinies” as Aguilar San-Juan mentions contrary to their representation as victims in resettlement countries.

Yet, overcoming economic challenges through community cooperation also illustrates how the Vietnamese refugees are marginalized and cannot benefit from the US banking system. Moreover, although Little Saigon as an ethnic enclave provides a space for ethnic solidarity against a systematic inequality, there are some drawbacks related to sociocultural complexities. The long-term limited access to the US financial institutions and intergroup dependence system pave the way for the invasion of privacy on the personal level and creates a kind of precarity that can damage their bonds as a community in some circumstances. When Mrs. Minh could not pay the hui money, she and her gambler son in Vietnam become a subject of other people’s gossip among the community.

During one of the international money transfers through hui on behalf of Mrs. An for her family members in Vietnam, Mai and Minh learn that Mrs. An fails to repay the money she withdraws. Minh pays her debt with the money he asks from Cliff, whom he last

contacted thirty years ago. Minh's action represents the potential collective effort and unspoken reciprocity to overcome their present difficulties as national subjects. The scene that Minh gives the check to Mrs. An to pay her debt in hui and enable her to keep the position in hui show not only the varying individual attitude in the same community and how they try to "stay Vietnamese" through reestablished relationality: "We carry our grief camouflaged and concealed but occasionally it pushes through the conjunctions of our lives. Private sadness becomes public" (Cao 155). Despite the spatial and temporal dispersion, they try to mend their broken lives in their "new" and supposedly "free" lives by themselves. Thus, it proves Aguilar San-Juan's claim that "Staying Vietnamese is a collective issue of community-building and place-making rather than a problem of individual adaptation" (xxvii).

In this context, the formation of Little Saigon also allows for remaining in connection with the homeland politics for the overseas Vietnamese. As Vo and Danico mention, a group of Vietnamese refugees "focus on lobbying for religious and political freedom in their former homeland and still work towards overthrowing the current Communist Vietnamese regime" ("The Formation of Post-Suburban Communities" 25). Minh and Mai encounter a random protestor who requests their support for his petition campaign against the current government's human right violations. Minh also mentions another protest organization in a high school regarding raising the flag of the Communist Party. These efforts give Minh a "renewed hope" (Cao 57). However, as scholars suggest, political engagements related to homeland politics are decreasing in importance "with an increasing presence of second generation, who have little to no memories of the political climate back home" (Vo and Danico 25).

When it comes to the younger generation Vietnamese, as exemplified with Mai, however, "staying Vietnamese" corresponds to exploring identity that they still try to resolve and history that they do not have a direct access to. The effort to recreate a connection to the homeland to overcome the nostalgic feeling stemming from spatial and temporal disconnection with the land cannot fully recompense the losses and lacks of authenticity. Contrary to Bão, who "still occupies past" with Minh, Mai asserts that "[her] heart is not in them" during their visits to Little Saigon.

3.3. ABJECTION AND LIMINALITY IN VIETNAMESE AMERICAN IDENTITY

As the youngest survivor of their family, Mai is a law graduate who works as a research librarian for a less hectic lifestyle. Taking care of her father, Mai never fully recovers from the trauma of her sister Khanh's death, and her mother's staying in Vietnam when she gets on the plane with her father Minh after the war. In the second half of the book, Cao introduces Bão, Mai's alter ego, who shows up as an intruder voice Mai tries to silence. In the second half of the book, named "half-lives," the reader starts to hear Bão's narrative voice from 2006 in present-day Virginia as she situates herself as "the omniscient" voice (235). The narrative voice is divided among Mai, Bão, and Minh. Struggling with the multiple voices in her head and going through occasional nervous breakdowns, Mai has a dissociative identity disorder. While Mai's voice symbolizes her American identity that she wants to prioritize in her life, Bão, meaning "the storm" in Vietnamese, epitomizes her Vietnamese root that she tends to turn a deaf ear to (Cao 244).

Mai's "self-division," in the words of Hao Jun Tam, proves that "the specter of South Vietnam finds ways to crack the refugee's American peace and to demand an afterlife at all costs" (60). Considering the role of the younger generation in diving into the gaps in collective and family histories, it can be stated that Mai's case forces the reader "to rethink a society's relationship to its dead," in part and to read the loss from the perspective of the 1.5 Vietnamese American generation (Cho 29).³⁰ Having built a new life in Virginia with her father Minh, Mai represents her willingness to assimilate and live as an ordinary American. In her account, except for the downward mobility they experience in the first years of resettlement, Cao does not include instances of discrimination that Mai experiences as a refugee, except for Minh's working as a janitor. However, Mai's well-adapted refugee figure is disrupted by her inner voice, since Bão asks for a retaliation for the past. She says, "Vietnam has not receded for me, as it has for Mai; it still tugs and pulls" (Cao 240). In this regard, forgetting is problematic in Cao's account. As Viet Thanh

³⁰ In some secondary sources, Mai is described as 1.5 generation Vietnamese. In this dissertation, generation names are based on Rubén G. Rumbaut's formulation. Since Mai moved to America when she was seventeen, she should be considered 1.25 generation Vietnamese.

Nguyen notes, “forgetting is an inconsequential and unintentional act. But forgetting can also be a significant act that we engage in willfully, both as a form of denial and as a form of confrontation” (Zhang “An Interview”). Mai avoids confronting the persisting pain of her sister’s death and her unresolved issues with her mother. Bão’s defensive demeanor against [Mai]her will to forget manifests itself as a life in a painful limbo that precludes her from disowning the past.

Therefore, Mai’s dissociative identity disorder (DID) is a serious representation of the identity crisis that is shared among the younger Vietnamese Americans who negotiate identity and belonging in the context of lasting stress of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. In *The Lotus and The Storm*, Mai exemplifies a different case due to her direct experience of war trauma. She has a fragmented identity that is caught up with an internal dilemma leading her both to desire and refute reconciliation with the past and its impacts. Among many things, it is the trauma, loss, and absent presence of her mother that constitute a threat to her identity and cause her to become an abject in the first place. Her sister’s traumatic death in front of her eyes leaves a permanent damage on her identity.

As a 1.25 generation refugee child, Mai’s experience inescapably includes “growing up American” (Zhou 1). It is “no easy thing” Bankston and Zhou further state, considering the societal pressure of assimilation and the family pressure to remain Vietnamese (1). In Mai’s case, it is rather an inner force to remain Vietnamese as her shattered family does not dictate such formation. On the dual self-perception and multiple presentations of self in daily life, Viet Thanh Nguyen says that it is a way of “a very basic human mechanism of coping,” whether speaking of minority lives or not, after experiencing the violence or being a part of it (Zhang “An Interview”). Mai struggles to balance her identities that cause an instability in her psyche and abjection. However, while her Americanized self cannot fight with the past, her Vietnamese self cannot erase the adverse effects of war violence on a small child’s psyche.

Therefore, Mai’s unstable emotional state, resulting from trauma and emotional neglect also reflects a liminality in the cultural sense. Speaking broadly, the theme of liminality is studied in terms of the generational clash between the first generation and younger

generation Vietnamese resulting from silence and necessity to conform in the host countries. The struggle to assume a position in-between through their intersecting identities causes a “tension” regarding belonging and thereby causes liminality for the younger Vietnamese American (Powell 22). Despite her effort to adopt her American identity, Mai deeply retains her racial identity that intrudes itself as an aggressive inner voice. Thus, her liminal state of mind causes a turbulence in her feeling of belonging as a minority subject. Although the emergence of Bão as another narrator voice does not make sense in logical terms, it functions as a mechanism that allows the reader to empathize with the psychic turbulence Cao goes through. Kristeva writes, the abject is “radically excluded” and “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (*Powers* 2).

With her older sister Khanh, Mai has a lively childhood, being raised by a Chinese grandmother with whom they have a mutually caring relationship. Khanh has an intense curiosity for science and the cosmic mysteries of the universe, and she dreams of getting the Nobel Prize one day. Mai situates herself as an intellectual person pursuing “facts to be learned” (39). Although they sound like opposite personalities in their interests, Cao describes two sisters as complementary opposites. Khanh is shot by a bullet targeting their father on a family trip. Mai recounts those moments: “The windshell shatters. My sister is sitting next to me, then the entire weight of her body collapses into my arms” (106). The scene illustrates Mai’s abjection in the face of death as Kristeva writes, “[t]he corpse is the utmost abjection” and “death infecting life. Abject” (Kristeva, *Powers* 4). Her nature of being is threatened by her dying sister that shows her the limits of the self. Moreover, Khanh’s death disrupts their enduring bond as siblings and her loss creates immense grief for the family to deal with and destroys the balance in the household.

As a child, Mai initially experiences the trauma of her sister’s death in many forms including silence, fainting, and an accompanying mystic presence that is interpreted to be the ghost of her deceased sister. Going silent for a time, Mai has her first dissociation experience right after her sister’s death. During her psychic trauma, James Baker, an American serviceman with whom Mai and Khanh have a close friendship looks for alternative ways to help Mai relieve her stress overload and to start talking again. James

gives Mai a mynah bird which mimics the voices it hears. Aside from reducing Mai's loneliness and isolation, the bird mysteriously renames Mai "Cecile" as the bird asks Mai to play with him: "'Cecile, Cecile,' he persists. He is wooing me out of my fortress of silence" (Cao 137). To the people's efforts to convince her to speak again, Mai as a child resists. She feels her disrupted voice helping her soothe herself as if the absence of speech can erase her presence and lead her to disappear, or to use her words, "to be swallowed up inside a vast expanse of space" (128). Mynah bird, native to Asia is known to mimic the human speech in captivity (Janette, *My Viet* 201). Metaphorically, the bird is seen "as a harbinger of the unseen, of past and future, death and hope, a figure of the soul and a figure of life's meaningfulness" (Fischer 216). Furthermore, as Michael M. J. Fischer mentions, the mynah, as a popular figure, symbolizes reincarnation in Chinese folk tales (216). Therefore, the mynah bird, both symbolizes Mai's captivity in grief and represents her rebirth as Cecile, a traumatized child trying to deal with her sister's death.

She depicts the first psychological consequence of the terrifying event, following the burial of Khanh with her recognition "a strange feeling sank into [her] that night" (129). She describes it as "The shadows had followed me home, into my bedroom" (129). Trying to fathom her emotions, she feels the presence of "another person nearby" and wonders if "there [is] someone on the other side of [her]?" (129) With an effort to find an explanation to her psychic turbulence, she claims,

Ghosts can be found anywhere, but especially here. Even in Saigon where people can flip a switch and summon electricity to make a dark room bright or a hot room cool, people believe in the supernatural. . . . A mysterious noise in the chimney, a fleeting silhouette by the window, an electrical charge in the air—these can all be explained away by reference to ghosts. I understand it now more than ever. The explanation satisfies. It feels personal, the presence of a loved one. I am not sure how spirits fit into my sister's world, the world of psychics. But I embrace the thought: My sister has turned into a ghost, a flying, extravagant figure that floats and hovers, creeps and crawls, always watching over me. (Cao 129)

Since Mai faints several times at school, she ends up being sent home, her teacher "describe[s] the incident to Mother as something 'like being possessed'" (185). Observing the baffling behaviors in their child, the family brings a "that phap" that she defines as "a revered teacher, a master of magical verses" to learn what is wrong with her as a part of

her parents' "plans to have [Mai] fixed" (Cao 186). Examining her, the monk similarly mentions "a negative energy," the presence of "[m]aleficent spirits. Ghosts. Devils" that plague the child Mai (188). "I wonder if you have a death in the family" he continues "[b]ecause a death can be an opening for other spirits to enter your home" and Mai as the "smallest person in the household is the one who the dead enters" (189).

"It is not your fault," the *thay phap* hastens to add, looking straight at me. He is overly kind. "These are floating souls that are angry. Perhaps they have been wronged sometime, somewhere. Perhaps they had difficult lives. They will have their ups and downs, their moods. They are homeless, and just like a snail that needs to look for a shell to house itself, these spirits are tired of wandering and are merely looking for a place to stay. And they found you." (Cao 189)

The quotation illustrates a similar explanation to what Mai Lan Gustafsson suggests in her study on ghosts in post-war Vietnam as the Vietnamese community tries to come up with a reason to figure out these prevalent irrational occurrences in society. Distinguishing among haunting ghosts based on the manner of death (as ancestral spirit or an angry ghost), Gustafsson specifies those "angry spirits" the monk mentions as "the war dead" (41). She alludes to the presence of "the *ngươi bi mat*" (people who are lost in the war) who are transformed by violent death into a malicious ghost (33). In addition, in cases of dying young, their spirits are perceived to be "lost" as their tormentors refer to them "*bi mat*" (58). In this sense, the diagnosis the Buddhist monk makes also seems to confirm Mai's self-diagnosis about her distorted body and mind perception. In other words, Mai is thought to be the "human attendant" (x) of a "spirit possession illness caused by war ghosts" (Gustafsson 9).

The family's acceptance of the idea that she is possessed by the ghost of her sister is a failure of her parents who could not recognize the anomalies in Mai's psychology as a result of trauma and emotional loneliness. Yet, the ghost metaphor enables the writer to address the spectral impact of war that haunts Vietnamese psyches. In this regard, "survivors' guilt" is an important component in the evocation of ghost metaphor and the haunting quality of Vietnamese refugee memory besides "fear": "How come they died and we did not?" (Zhang "An Interview"). It can be stated that their belief in Khanh's ghost afflicting Mai stems from the guilt of surviving as well as the failure to protect

Khanh from dying. Similarly, for Mai, it is also “survivor’s guilt” as she might have been the one who died instead of her sister. Either way, there is an ongoing reckoning with the past in Cao’s novel both on personal and communal levels.

Critically, the ghost metaphor also stands for an articulation of a small child who needs the close care of her mother. Mai’s past and present lives are wrought up by the absent presence of her mother, Quy. She remains deeply saddened by the lack of maternal warmth that could not be fulfilled by anyone except for Quy, her mother. She describes Quy’s distance from her:

In this shifting, parallel world, Mother’s face remains expressionless. With childlike fussiness, Cecile gives her arm another tug. Mother stares into the direction of Cecile’s face but she does not tip over into the present. I watch in this dreamlike moment. I see the bony edge of her withdrawn hand and an imperviousness to her surrounding space. I can feel the agitation of Cecile’s efforts. She caresses Mother’s face like a blind person who counts on her sense of touch to open up the world for her. I watch her fingers as they trace Mother’s nose and eyes and mouth. Our mother briefly stirs and puts her arm around Cecile, like a hug but not quite. Cecile is held but not comfortingly. A few moments later, Mother rises, disowning the touch. (Cao 216)

The scene illustrates Mai’s effort to connect with her mother through her childhood naivety, hoping for Quy’s attention to find safety and comfort as a child. Yet, Quy’s intense grief for Khanh’s death shows itself as neglect in Mai’s world and causes her to feel abandoned. Her mother’s inefficacy in communicating and showing affection towards Mai greatly contributes to Mai’s developing the symptoms of her personality disorder and experiencing disconnection from her body.

Significantly though, the symptoms of her illness worsen during the Tet when Bão, “the malevolent central player” among Mai’s three personalities, emerges (Cao 235). Despite the cease-fire, when the Northern army launched an unexpected attack on the South, the course of the war changed for the country and the Vietnamese people. Finding themselves under heavy fire in the city, Mai and their mother hide at home with their relatives while Minh is in the field. Getting out of the house through the garden, Mai gets lost, confused by the sounds of bombings and sirens. Apart from confronting the ferocity of the war, she looks death in the face hiding in the ruins where she witnesses the shooting of her best

friend, James, who comes to look for her. Seeing the enemy sniper from where she hides and having the chance to warn James, Mai freezes, unable to move or talk and watches James's body fall to the ground. Feelings of guilt and responsibility leave her with pain and self-blame throughout her adolescence and part of her adult life until she visits Vietnam years later, where she finds James alive.

Therefore, the Tet Offensive points to a critical moment in her life as she experiences an intense structural dissociation related to childhood trauma splitting. Minh claims, "To understand Mai, you have to understand Tet" (192). In the words of Cao, it characterizes a time when Mai is drawn into a "fatal blackness" that captures her in the paradox of blame and denial with the defiant voice of her shadow self, Bão (240). At that moment, Bão, representing Mai's survival instinct at the same time, intervenes and leads her to protect herself: "Shut up, a voice commands me. The voices are back, but not indistinct this time" (163). The scene is significant in terms of displaying the psychology of a child who tries to deal with the shock and terror while going through a hallucinatory state. She is confused between dream and reality, that results in detaching from time and oneself:

James! James! I yell, but my voice dips out of my command and reach. I dare not move or breathe.

It is happening again. A shadow, two shadows, restless and charged, fling themselves against the cistern's walls. They spin as they expand and shrink, vanish and reappear, inside and outside the fleshly manifestation of my being. They race wailing and lunatic inside the tight confines of the cistern, one, the smaller of the two, crying and hiding behind the bigger, fiercer one. The shadows converge, then detach. I am here and not here. I watch and am watched. I am. I am not.

Like a storm, black and raging, a figure from within me shifts her shape until she is enormous and angry and erupts with a roar that swipes everything else aside. A *keep quiet* is sounded. It is there, speaking in the voice of an angry girl. (163)

In the end, it is the resistant "she" in the voice of Bão that keeps Mai sane and safe. As Bão claims, "She will continue to blame James's death on me even as she ignores my struggles to save her" (Cao 240). The event forever alters Mai's interaction with her environment as her father Minh finds her as "a wholly different child" (199).

At that moment of probable death, Bão appears to save Mai (herself) as she recounts “I saw her bulging, fearful eyes . . . My hands grabbed her arms and legs, and I heaved her into the cistern” (239). Bão’s emergence at that moment marks the abjection of Mai once again when her boundaries of identity are severely disrupted by feelings of fear and abandonment. Her abjection leads her to develop an empowered identity that functions as a protection mechanism. Among her three separate identities, respectively, Mai, Cecile and “Bão, the storm,” not Bão, the treasure” as she puts it, Bão claims to be her strongest self that comes out when Mai’s vulnerable body is unable to overcome the terror and confusion in the wreckages of the buildings shattered by bombs.

In addition, the confrontation with death and seeing James’s corpse—although she later learns that he is only injured—reinforces her abjection once again after Khanh’s death. Such confrontation with death corresponds to an encounter with the fragility of life and one’s physicality once again. Because “the abject continuously violates one’s own borders” (McAfee 47). Thus, the blurring of the border between life and death in Mai’s case also brings out a blurring of boundaries of her dissociated adult selves. As mentioned earlier, Bão’s appearance marks a new phase in Mai’s life since she situates herself as “the omniscient one among us [them] three” (Cao 235): “Cecile is merely the charming little child, freshly hatched, who allowed a bird to coax her into talking and then became its playmate. But I am Bão, the storm, not Bão, the treasure” (235).

As seen in the quotation above, Bão distinguishes herself from Cecile who, states, does not hold “malice or wrath inside” Cao 267). Cecile represents Mai’s childhood innocence still residing in her and helps her recall their memories in Vietnam. Cecile appears sometimes when Mai plays Chopin, her mother’s favorite composer on the piano. In this sense, Cecile represents a bridge that Mai preserves as her link to the past and protects herself from Bão’s rage. Bão as the narrator voice compares Mai’s transition to Cecile as “much smoother than when I elbow and band my way out” (Cao 267). Thus, Mai’s transition to Cecile presents a voluntary shift and does not constitute a threat to Mai’s stability. Within time, the image of the fearful child gives more way to a fierce psyche with Bão who occasionally haunts her restrained and compliant life in America, sometimes in the form of physical self-violence that results in bruises.

In Bão's peevishness, one can trace Mai's complicated relationship with her dysfunctional mother. Metaphorically reading, the appearance of Bão also can be interpreted as a symbolic repetition of Mai's separation from her mother Quy, thus entry into the symbolic realm.³¹ At one point, during the Tet Offensive, Bão reveals how Mai gets lost when her mother breaks down with a heightened anxiety and starts desperately calling for Khanh instead of Mai in a delusional state: "Mai was trying to hold on to a corner of Mother's sleeve. I listened as Mother repeated our sister's name, over and over, abandoning us with each repetition. A tear fell, but I wiped it off" (238). So, the moment "when she [Mai] fell and lost her grip on Mother's sleeve" marks her realization that Mai is by herself in dealing with the cruelty of the adult world—symbolic order—with a war in the background (238). In Kristeva's account, the symbolic corresponds to abjection where the child simultaneously breaks away with the semiotic space of mother and becomes a speaking subject as a part of the patriarchal culture (*Powers* 67).³² Mai's traumatic experience parallels a transitioning into a different phase of life where she starts to deal with life on her own. Thus, the scene resonates with the original split from the mother as Mai transitions from her child self—that is embodied by Cecile to Bão. Cao's choice of Bão as the second narrator voice instead of Cecile also in the novel supports this claim.

The symbolic is also related to "the patriarchal social structure," and the language in the symbolic has "two functions" (Stokes-king 36-37). On one hand, it permits one to access order, and on the other, it represses unconscious thoughts" (Sedehi et al 1491). Unlike Lacan, Kristeva underlines that "the symbolic is always under the influence of both the semiotic and the symbolic" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 24). The semiotic chora, with its affect-driven modes of signification, remains a companion in the process of signification" (McAfee 37). In other words, there is no complete separation from the mother and what she represents in the symbolic: "[s]ubjects are always in-process, no one can completely accomplish matricide" (Stone 6). Yet, Mai tries to repress Bão, and everything Bão connotes including, her Vietnamese root, her traumas, and involuntary severance from

³¹ In Kristeva's theorization, the symbolic points to a time when the baby experiences abjection during the pre-linguistic semiotic stage and becomes a part of the social order.

³² For Kristeva, the child also adopts "the ways of the symbolic—of culture—from its mother and not just its father" (McAfee 35).

Quy. Quy plays a key role in Mai's division and ongoing negotiation with the past. As Bão clearly puts it, "It is always Mother I see even as I slip back and forth through the black waters of consciousness" (Cao 238). Apart from pointing to the blurred identity boundaries of Mai under the threat of death, Bão symbolizes "the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost" (Kristeva, *Powers* 15). Bão resents her mother's disappearing care while keeping Mai alive.

Although Bão keeps Mai sane at the moment of terror, Bão is also afflicted with contradictions as she represents a part of Mai who desires the safety and comfort of her mother. Mai's wish can be equated with the speaking subject's contradictory yearning for "chora" that Kristeva uses in relation to the semiotic as it constitutes "our first experience is of a realm of plenitude, of a oneness with our environment, and of the semiotic *chora*," "womb or nurse in which elements are without identity and without reason" (qtd. in Oliver 46).

Kristeva's notion of the chora, the psychic space in which the infant resides and in which it expresses its energy. Insofar as the mother is the child's primary caregiver, the chora is a maternal space. The child orients its energy in relation to its mother—who is not yet an "object" for the child "subject." There is not yet any subject-object distinction. The child experiences plenitude without differentiation. (McAfee 35-36)

Therefore, the chora connotes a state of wholeness where the child has the feeling of unity with the mother. Although it appears like a state of harmony, the chora is also chaotic. Bão, by her occasional destructive mood like a storm, resonates with Mai's desire for the dilemmatic space of chaos. When Quy's mental health does not allow her to provide Mai with warmth and comfort, Mai's psychological fluctuations and detachment increase. "What was there," she asks herself, "before the darkened world took over and made me smash about?" (238) As she responds, "It is always Mother I see even as I slip back and forth through the black waters of consciousness. It is always about her repudiation, her disappearance, and withdrawal" (238). In this regard, Quy also embodies their life before the war in Vietnam when they lived as a peaceful and happy family. Mai is torn by helplessness and self-sufficiency against her mother's both physical and emotional absence.

After the war, Mai and her father Minh migrate to the United States where Mai tries to adapt and achieve belonging. Yet, Bão, as the abject always haunts them, embodying also the contradiction of being a minority subject: “I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). To put it otherwise, the new consciousness characterized by Bão constitutes a liminal state of mind that rejects reconciliation and assimilation also in cultural sense. Thus, what enrages Bão most is Mai’s “display of Americanness” (Cao 266):

Does she think that her polish sets her apart from us? I see her becoming not American but simply un-Vietnamese, and the visual assertion of this process is enough to make her even more of a stranger to me. She is, by all outward appearances, standing guard against the trespasses of Vietnam, palms turned outward as if she were there to forestall our advances. (263-264)

According to Bão’s description, Mai is an assimilated Vietnamese that has adapted to ways of living in America. On the other hand, her Americanized appearance does not eradicate the traces of the past and the mental entrapment she feels as Bão, even when she achieves cultural integration. Bão insists on the veracity of the loss and the effect of unspoken histories that claim recognition. She says “the grain, the sort of dissonance and melancholy that produced someone like me” (236). Bão, representing Mai’s nostalgic Vietnamese root also is a national abject that Mai tries to repress since Bão is a threat to her American identity.

Mai’s resistance to Bão also presents another significant dilemma in the younger Vietnamese psyche. She occupies a liminal status, as she does not feel she belongs to Vietnam. Despite taking her father to communal gatherings at Little Saigon, Mai confesses that “[her]heart is not in them. I know he and Bão still occupy that past, its emotional nodes, and swells, with doggedness and abandon” (272). For Mai, representing the “outwardly Americanized” part of a young Vietnamese refugee, home and its connotations signify painful memories and complex emotions (242). When she returns to Vietnam to carry her father’s ashes to South China Sea to offer him a symbolic reunion with her mother, her impressions and feelings as “Viet Kieu” speaks for the exilic condition felt by the younger Vietnamese who come to the US as children or teenagers.

It is exactly as it was—this is what people like me want very much to tell themselves when they return home. But this is not the case. Thirty years after the war's end, the city is visited daily by the love-struck Viet Kieu, the overseas Vietnamese who, like me, are perpetually filled with unrequited longing. We have embarked on our trips in search of a time and place that no longer exists. We have carried our lives here from the other side of earth. We want to take a lungful of air and fall in love. And we are clearly not ready to adjust our expectations to meet this radically different reality.

If it were not for the hard currency—U.S. dollars—we bring with us, we wouldn't even be welcome here. This is no longer my city. It is no longer my inheritance. (355)

She feels like “an ordinary stranger” in Vietnam who is aware that it is an effort to revitalize the economy with the Doi Moi reforms that the current government allows them to visit the country (Cao 355). In her ““Like a Foreigner in My Homeland,”” where she examines the overseas Vietnamese's relationship with their homelands, Reed-Danahay notes that the legacy of the Vietnam War maintains its “ghostly presence” despite their desire for finding belonging in the homeland (614). Her sense of non-belonging in Vietnam is imbued with a resentment towards her country from where she was forcibly displaced. Nevertheless, a complete disownment is impossible to achieve. Her hint at the end for healing or the initiation she will take to heal indicates the need to reconnect with their roots to reconcile, even if she is aware that it will not compensate for the losses. After all, the return unavoidably reminds young diasporans of “a childhood and innocence stolen from them” (Um 248).

3.4. CONCLUSION

In *Departures*, the CRS scholars note that “hospitality is never forever, often comes with costs, and exists as a constant source of indignity for the recipient” (106). As a refugee child herself, Lan Cao explores the devastating returns of the hospitality conferred on the Vietnamese refugee. Considering the criticality of the past for the younger generation Vietnamese, *The Lotus* emphasizes the importance of confrontation with the past for both generations. Minh, as an aging Vietnamese man in America reckons with the national and personal past as a former soldier and husband. His narration is closely related to historical truth and brings light to the association of warfare with American masculinity during the Vietnam War. The novel depicts how Vietnam suffered from this equitation and its lasting

impacts on the lives of the Vietnamese as resentment and regret. The father figure Minh, epitomizing the defeated and ineffectual South Vietnamese masculinity engages in a reckoning with the past and illustrates how the US ontological insecurity reflects itself during the Vietnam War.

The younger Vietnamese voice, Mai experiences the violence of the war in the worst way by losing her sister, mother, and homeland. She still struggles with her divided identity. While Cecile, as an innocent child voice appears right after witnessing her sister Khanh's death, Bão comes forward as a character who represents her alter ego. Cecile is examined as the abject embodiment of a frightened and abandoned child, emerging as a result of death threat to her bodily existence. Her mother's emotional and physical abandonment of her intensify Mai's difficult situation. Furthermore, Bão is Mai's national abject Vietnamese identity who claims a voice to maintain her ethnic identity. Despite Mai's effort to suppress it, her Vietnamese identity demands a recognition to reflect on the past that is doomed to be erased by the Western forces. Thus, Bão's voice is quite symbolic in presenting the silenced Vietnamese voice in personal and national levels. Trauma, loss, and absent presence of her mother determine Mai's effort to balance her conflicting identities. Her divided personalities signify the trauma of her being an abject. As Chapter Four will also illustrate, the absent presence of parents is a common issue in the literature of the younger Vietnamese generation. Their responses vary based on their experience of the war. Mai's case displays the experience of a war-exposed child, struggling with psychological disturbance. It is important to reflect upon the cost of trauma and the reaction to the nationally formed abject identity by the Vietnamese, starting in Vietnam. Cao's extensive treatment of the war from the perspective of a former South Vietnamese soldier and a refugee child is a great contribution for the exploration of the refugee narrative as a source of knowledge as advocated by the CRS in literature-based analysis.

CHAPTER 4

ABSENT YET PRESENT: *THINGS WE LOST TO THE WATER*

Things We Lost to the Water is Eric Nguyen's 2021 debut novel, revolving around a single mother who immigrates to New Orleans in a refugee boat. The child of boat refugees himself, Eric Nguyen has received the Crook's Corner Book Prize and the Saints and Sinners Emerging Writer Award. In an interview regarding his work, Nguyen as a second-generation Vietnamese mentions how his family's untold refugee story becomes a source for inspiration. He says, "I found fiction as a way to kind of get into that mindset of what it was like to kind of be them" (Quinn and Smith). In this sense, the impact of displacement and being a refugee constitute an important part of his exploration of his Vietnamese past.

Opening in 1979 with a hurricane test alarm, *Things We Lost to the Water* starts with a hint that water is a determining factor in Hu'o'ng's family's displacement and emplacement.³³ Fleeing Vietnam in 1978 with her son Tuan while she is pregnant with her second son, Binh, Huong is a single refugee mother. Although their original plan is to migrate together as a family, she realizes that her husband, Cong disappears in the midst of chaos and the crowd when they are about to get into the refugee boat. Sending many letters to Vietnam to get in touch with her husband, Huong has no answers until she receives an anonymous letter that tells her to stop contacting him. Years later, when she travels to Vietnam for his funeral, Huong learns that Cong started a new family there.

After Huong arrives in New Orleans, her life as mentioned by Suzanne Van Atten "is guided by a singular goal imprinted on her the day she left Vietnam: survival, for herself and her sons, at all cost." At this point, an early scene from the book illustrates Huong's struggle to survive as a single Vietnamese refugee woman: "Up the dirt road. A mother and her sons. Hand in hand" (5). Despite the dreary portrayal, Huong manages to build a life for themselves in America. On Vietnamese women, Linda Trinh Vo writes, "Far from the perception of them as fragile and passive victims of war, they are resilient and strong

³³ Hereinafter referred to as Huong.

survivors who have sought to control the often bewildering and uncertain socioeconomic transformations that have confronted them” (“Managing Survival” 237). As the sole caretaker of her children, Huong ensures their well-being and thus exemplifies one of those “resilient and strong survivor” despite her national abject status as a Vietnamese woman.

Identity and belonging are two major themes in Nguyen’s book for he himself is a member of the second-generation Vietnamese. In Vietnamese, the word for water and country is the same: “nước.” Apart from being “a salient medium and metaphor for diaspora and forced displacement,” Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi writes, water also alludes to “fluidity, fugitivity, movement, and connectivity—the erosion of borders by the constant waves of the sea” (11). At first sight, the title of the book draws attention to the destructive force of water, however, the course of events in the book also points to its regenerative side. Although Huong as a first-generation Vietnamese realizes that she develops a sense of belonging in New Orleans after almost three decades, her redisplacement as the result of the Katrina hurricane at the end of the novel also points to the unstable nature of migration and belonging.

For her sons, Tuan and Binh (Ben)—the younger generation Vietnamese—the elusive nature of water becomes a metaphor for their search for identity, whether it be through gang involvement to find acceptance in the community or searching it through the semiotic space of literature. For Huong, it parallels her finding a balance between her motherhood and her self-care. In this regard, the water symbolism in the novel as a recurring element can be associated with the sense of belonging, manifesting itself with ebbs and flows as the characters try to establish or achieve it. The challenges posed by the national abjection and the ways the characters deal with them represent the fluid dimensions of belonging in national and personal levels. These assumptions can be treated through Kristeva’s formulations regarding subjectivity since “all her key terms—from the subject in process to the *chora* to abjection . . . invoke movement, change, and dynamism” (McAfee 88).

It is their father's Cong's absence in the novel that haunts them. After the Communist takeover, the new government announced that certain groups, varying from "elected officials from the national assembly down to the village level, civil servants, members from non-communist political parties" to "professors, teachers, writers, and artists," should be enlisted to attend "'reeducation' sessions" that would allegedly last a couple of weeks (Chan 65). Seeing it as an opportunity to integrate into the Communist rule, many people stood ready at gathering locations to be picked up: "To their surprise, soldiers packed them into covered vehicles, from which they could not see where they were going, and transported them to re-education camps, where they were subjected to hard labor, a near-starvation diet, and political indoctrination" (Chan 66). The prisoners of lower ranks were released in a short while, a great deal of them stayed imprisoned in reeducation camps for years (66). Cong is one of those Vietnamese who is subjected to torture in the reeducation camp and develops fear of water.

This novel becomes as much about moving on as it is about simply moving. Nguyen's characters experience loss—of the boys' father, of their homeland—but their losses don't define them. Forward movement, even if it doesn't take you quite where you wanted to go, is an act that must be learned. (Washington)

Considering the American dominant representation of rescue and liberation of the Vietnamese refugees, Nguyen's novel brings a different light to the Vietnamese displacement experience, exploring the risks and costs of fleeing through water. For his fear of water after being traumatized in the reeducation camp, Cong cannot get into the boat. On their return for her husband's funeral, Huong witnesses the comfortable life of Cong and his present wife in Vietnam. Comparing it to all the hardships they have been through in America as refugees, Huong finds their low standards of living in America unfair. In this sense, her account destabilizes the politics of rescue by the American government, presented to be for the benefit of the Vietnamese.

Although Huong develops a sense of belonging at a certain point in America, her mind is always haunted by the possibilities of life in Vietnam as a family. What she goes through in America both in material and emotional terms display the consequences of "colonization and conquest that brought these people" to America (Nguyen, "The Literary

Star”). Like many Vietnamese at the time, she had to leave the country to ensure the survival of her family. Her children’s identity conflicts, as they grow up, illustrate the struggle of the younger generation Vietnamese who experience an abrupt separation from their homeland or find themselves absent from a sense of history, necessary for building self-knowledge. This chapter will argue that sociopolitical forces cannot determine the sense of belonging for the refugee abject that are put into disadvantaged positions in diaspora. Despite material and emotional losses the war caused, it is their capacity to develop emotional autonomy that enables them to reconstruct their lives, far from humiliating refugee portrayals.

4.1. SINGLE VIETNAMESE REFUGEE MOTHER

Evelyn N. Glenn writes, “for most of the twentieth century an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American, middle class, has been projected as universal” (3). In this description, while the mother is coded as the primary caregiver, especially during the child’s formative years, the dominant patriarchal version of mothering is criticized by feminist scholars for oppressing women. Scholars have challenged the dominant model by showcasing the different historical and cultural contexts that the woman of color has to deal with related to mothering (Glenn 5). In other words, the narrow definition eschews the varying motherhood experiences of different races and ethnicities, including the circumstances of the refugee woman. Despite similarities in terms of enacting basic responsibilities such as nurturing and nourishing, it is seen that the experience of mothering greatly varies among the refugee woman with the additional tasks and structural inequalities in displacement. In this sense, “[m]otherhood contains no single meaning or a given experience” (Liamputtong 28).

As Patricia Hill Collins writes, securing the physical survival of her children constitutes “a fundamental dimension of racial ethnic women’s motherwork” (49-50). In their struggle, race and class are significant elements in shaping their experiences and differing from the normative gendered constructions of motherhood (Collins 62). Referring to Kimberlé Crenshaw, it is important to reiterate the fact that the intersecting factors of gender, race, and class create overlapping forms of oppression and discrimination for the

people of color (1244). Examining the implications of migration in terms of family disruption, isolation, gender role expectations and the inefficient laws and policies on immigrant and refugee women, Julia E. Curry Rodriguez writes:

For immigrant and refugee mothers the consideration of how they come to be migrants is important. Whether they are able to take their children with them or they leave them behind has important bearing on their mental health, identity, and even their ability to draw on their strategies of survival in the host communities. (Rodriguez 213)

In this regard, the mothering experience of the Vietnamese woman during the war and displacement offers a fertile ground to examine the lived experiences of Vietnamese refugee mothers. An examination of these dynamics also destabilizes ideologies around the universalized motherhood notions and Vietnamese refugee reception politics. According to Linda Trinh Võ, the Vietnamese refugee woman has had to bear “the turmoil of war, dislocation and resettlement” (“Managing Survival” 237). In broader terms, the Vietnamese refugee mothers grapple with the socio-cultural and socio-structural barriers such as lack of English and labor exploitation. Social, cultural, and political barriers as the mechanisms of national abjection impact their life negatively, including their daily interactions, social integration, and accessing social services following the sudden displacement. These elaborations do not necessarily serve to offer a victimized representation of the Vietnamese refugee woman but rather emphasize their strength and resistance against the oppressive economic, political, and cultural systems in the US despite their disadvantageous status. As O’Reilly writes, “while normative motherhood oppresses women, non-normative mothering serves to empower women” (O’Reilly 5). Therefore, the maternal experience as a national abject corresponds to a distinct, non-normative category that has variations in it.

In the novels studied in this dissertation, *Short Girls*, *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, and *The Lotus and The Storm*, different instances of refugee mothering and their relationships with the younger generation Vietnamese play a prominent role. In the same vein, in *Things We Lost to the Water*, Huong, as a displaced Vietnamese woman, mothers her two sons in a hostile environment after giving birth to her second child, Binh (Ben) in a refugee camp in Singapore. Eric Nguyen’s narrative offers a comparison of the

mother-son and mother-daughter relationships in the Vietnamese families. As a national abject Vietnamese, Huong is also “exploited for [her] labor” just “like other people of color in North America” (Duncan and Wong 163). In Cong’s absence, Huong also has an extra mental load both as the only breadwinner and caregiver for her children. She says “Parenting was hard enough; parenting alone and in a different country was something else together” (Eric Nguyen 60). There is an intersection of “refugeeness and single mothering” that shapes her experience (Banerjee et al 16). Thus, the motherhood experience in general and mothering as a refugee become complicated, as she also deals with the physical and emotional needs of her children in the host country, regardless of what she has gone through as a refugee.

Sponsored by the church, Huong and her sons start to live with the Minhs, a Vietnamese refugee family. Huong has difficulty in adapting to American conditions, starting from their accommodation problems and the issues of social inclusion as national abjects. Her insecurity as a single refugee mother is coupled with her illiteracy in English and unfamiliarity with US culture, constituting big challenges in their adjustment process. As Rodriguez writes, “[R]efugee mothers must deal with their gender roles while overcoming trauma caused by war and violence in their homelands and possibly in refugee camps” (Rodriguez 208). In this scenario, contacting Cong and bringing him to New Orleans seem to be the best option to ease their resettlement period. Despite her efforts, Cong cannot be contacted as he also purposefully misses the boat.

After overcoming the initial phases of confusion of the displacement process, the first thing Huong does is to leave the Minhs’ house and move into a hotel. The abusive relationship between the couple and their poor mental health disturbs Huong, who seeks to preserve the peaceful atmosphere of her previous house. She has difficulty in building connections with them, not only for their attitudes stemming from their different class background but also the toxic quality of their household. From “a house of love,” Huong and her sons transition to a household where the Minh family deals with alcoholism (Eric Nguyen 26). Therefore, her dream for a certain time period is to reunite with Cong, whom she never thinks has deliberately stayed in Vietnam and to reestablish their previous home

together: “It was all they ever needed—love. And with love, they would survive. She believed this with all heart” (Eric Nguyen 26).

Nonetheless, the social, political, and economic realities of the displacement and resettlement give way to different life circumstances, contrasting with Huong’s romanticized ideas of family. First of all, resettling in America with two small children turns out to be an isolating experience for her for a long time in physical and emotional terms. Language barrier and unfamiliarity with the culture and way of life specially create confusion and anxiety during their adaptation process. With no intention of returning but bringing her husband, Huong as the only parent has to earn a living and take care of the children. Therefore, she gets into a job search with the initiation of the priest, who has counselled her saying “you need money to survive in New Orleans,” as if there exists any other option (Eric Nguyen 13). The scene where she enters the restaurant to apply for a job illustrates one of the earlier instances that Huong goes through existing challenges of being a racialized refugee. Forgetting her notebook where she has basic English notes, she could not communicate with the girl at the counter. “‘*I am sorry*,’ Huong said, giving up, using the phrase she knew by heart: *I am sorry*. It was a good phrase to know” (15):

Before the girl could say anything else, Huong turned around and walked away with a steady stride. She didn’t know what had just happened, but she felt, in the pit of her stomach, that she had done something wrong. The last thing she saw on the girl’s face was a grimace. She was being told, she was sure, that she had done something rude, against the country’s laws. They would arrest her. They would arrest a woman and her children for not knowing the rules. Would they even let her stay because she was arrested? What would happen to them all then? They crossed the street and took another corner. She walked fast. (15-16)

Running away from the restaurant speedily, she nearly gets into a car accident when she jumps on the road without realizing the approaching car. The panic and fear push Huong into a state of hypervigilance and during her temporary loss of consciousness, she realizes that she has released Binh’s stroller. Apart from showing the psychological distress of a newly arrived refugee, resulting from the previous trauma and hostile environment, two scenes show the vulnerabilities of the Vietnamese woman refugee, reinforced by the absence of inclusive politics within the context of national abjection. Due to the economic recession and racial stereotypes at the time, the reception of the Vietnamese refugees by

the US government, out of so-called humanitarian concerns and as a “political statement” against the new communist regime, do not find a sympathetic response within the larger society (Võ, “Managing” 241).

In their study of East Asian mother’s problems in the diaspora, Duncan and Wong state that their “daily, material realities” are closely linked to “the larger social, political, and global processes” (173).³⁴ Likewise, in Huong’s case, it is “the significant impact of imperialism, colonialism, war, and militarism” that she has to deal with in negotiating the ways of survival for herself and her children (166). The negative impacts extend to the learning necessary strategies to find refuge and tackle the sociocultural and economic challenges. The political implications such as “the good refugee” discourse, the model minority, and the indebtedness state for “the gift of freedom” play an important role in the Vietnamese refugee lives. In this sense, the phrase “I’m sorry” uttered by Huong as a reflex sentence at that moment is a significant sign of the indoctrination process that starts in the refugee camp: “This is what the Australian English teachers taught her . . . *I am sorry for what happened*” (Eric Nguyen 15).

Similarly, addressing the power of the word “sorry” in his *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong writes “In the nail salon, sorry is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. It no longer merely apologizes, but insists, reminds: *I’m here, right here, beneath you*. It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable” (91-92). In this vein, as an expression of sympathy and regret, the phrase “sorry” can be interpreted as a strategical acknowledgment of American superiority and asking for recognition of the Vietnamese existence (Nguyen Tran 29). More importantly, in his study of Vuong’s novel, Mannhi Nguyen Tran comments that the phrase also alludes to the “geopolitical constructions of refugeeness” that position the Vietnamese refugees being indebted to their “savior.” As she puts it, “*On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* shows that, in the contemporary moment, rather than emphasizing refugee gratitude for geopolitical survival, capitalism reinforces the same oppressive constructions in the Vietnamese American working-class apology—saying “sorry” is a

³⁴ Although East Asia includes Japan, Korea, and China, the authors emphasize that their research also comprises Southeast Asian communities (Duncan and Wong 162).

tool for economic survival” (29). Therefore, the exploitative labor force in the nail salon and the expression “sorry” are acknowledgments of their positions as national objects in the US.

The same discursive constructions of refugeness are also apparent in Huong’s case. Here, apologizing is to ask forgiveness for her language incompetency as there is no suggestion of any behavioral wrongdoing. More than that, it echoes her national object status that “circumscribe[s] and radically differentiate[s] something that although deemed repulsively other is, paradoxically, at some fundamental level, undifferentiable part of the whole” (Shimakawa 2). While her refugee status dictates a search for labor and serves the existing socio-political system, it also hints her outsider status. Still, her national object status, coupled with her being single refugee mother, force her to become a part of the exploitative labor industry. At this point, the increase in the female-dominated industries and the demand for the “racialized female labor” enable a venue for the Vietnamese woman to enter into the workforce (Espiritu, “Gender” 81).

Formerly a housewife, Huong starts with a job in a Coke factory and continues to work in nail salons. Apart from positioning Huong in a vulnerable state in terms of financial insecurity, their family disruption also compels her to enact the motherly duties as a sole parent. As Rodriguez puts it, immigration experience for women is undoubtedly “affected by their gender roles” and it inevitably impacts “their roles as mothers” (207). For childcare, she receives help from Ba Giang, an older Vietnamese neighbor in Versailles with money. In this respect, Huong’s status challenges the stereotype of “‘financially dependent’ and ‘stay at home’ wife and mother within a conventional western nuclear family, as well as assumptions about white patriarchal motherhood” (Duncan and Wong 173). As a displaced refugee and woman of color, she has no such economic security to engage in a full-time mothering. At this point, Glenn argues that “mothering is not just gendered, but also racialized” (7). For Huong, a national object single refugee woman, there is a no chance of performing a good refugee model and good mother role at the same time. After all, for the woman of color and refugee woman, employment comes forward “as an extension of their family obligations—of their roles as mothers and

wives,” more than being a way of “self-fulfillment or even upward mobility as idealized by the White feminist movement” (qtd in Espiritu, “Gender”).

The work and life balance becomes more complicated over time, considering the fact that Huong raises her children in a different country and is alone in taking care of them and the household chores. Vietnamese cultural values such as “cooperative and selfless relations between family members” play an important role in determining the process (Kibria 170). Yet, the lives of the South Asian mothers are under the influence of “gendered cultural logics,” related not only to the “expectations of ideal motherhood and family values,” but also the combination of the host country politics and their community values (Banerjee 11). Their social marginalization in the host country may also lead to an idealized motherhood in the form of selfless mothers who develop “an increased sense of responsibility toward children” with “a more intimate involvement in their lives” (Banerjee 11).

Despite his resentment for Cong’s abandonment, her foremost aim is to protect her children from “all the cruelties of the world” during the war and displacement. However, poor working conditions and his absent presence pervade her psyche both in terms of fulfilling her motherly duties and her aspirations related to femininity. Motherhood and her compulsion to work lead her to deny her agency related to her female identity for a certain amount of time. For instance, when her friend Kim-Anh, a young refugee woman from the factory offers a night out, she initially rejects it for she cannot afford to pay extra to Ba Giang: “‘I have children’ Huong said. She had nearly said *responsibilities* but caught herself” (Eric Nguyen 52). When her colleague, Kim-Anh volunteers to cover the babysitter’s overtime, the conflict between being a mother and woman is apparent for Huong who:

reminded herself she wasn’t old. Twenty-seven wasn’t old. She was nearly Kim-Anh’s age. And she had missed out on so much. When she was younger she’d heard of tango lounges in Saigon, but she never visited. She became a wife. Then a mother. When the Americans came to Saigon, the city was a place of no self-respecting woman would find herself going to day or night. And when the Americans left—that was another story.

The war made her miss her youth. She owed this to herself. (Eric Nguyen 53)

Besides illustrating leisure time and enjoyment as a luxury for the working-class refugee woman, Huong's dilemma shows the impacts of war on the Vietnamese generations that extend a lifetime. Apart from the physical casualties and losses, living through the war kills the possibilities of a secure and ordinary life. In her newly rebuilt life, she is caught between the traditional gender-role expectations related to motherhood and her limited autonomy as a young refugee mother. On her night out with Kim-Anh, what Huong witnesses reveals the impossibility of an easy transition to America, particularly for a Vietnamese woman. Arguing that she has come to America on a cruise ship and works for fun, Kim-Anh turns out to be a lover of an elderly American man, helping her come to America. In both women's cases, it is seen that escape from a conflict zone and survival in an unequal system is not an easy matter. Those who somehow manage it like Kim-Anh and Huong are survivors.

Nevertheless, their representations display an identification with the abject positions and the ways they are dealing with it. Espiritu points to the structural barriers, impeding Asian women from the capacity of challenging patriarchal social structure due to "their social-structural location—as racially subordinated group" in American society ("Gender" 95). The same workings of power that position them into precarious status in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, and immigrant status, also lead to their being recruited to low-wage industries (85). In this regard, both Huong and Kim-Anh's cases as refugee women in the US expose a profound contrast to "popular assumptions of Asian Pacific Americans as 'model minorities'" (Duncan and Wong 168). Assuming "the successful model minority" stereotype to defeat "the haunting figure of the destitute refugee" is one of the "one representational strateg[ies]," the Vietnamese refugees are required during the assimilation process (Lieu 2). As working women after their perilous journey by boat, they seem to fit into the political and cultural expectations of the wider society, demonstrating a hardworking profile. Despite their hard work, they make a meager living from their jobs, thus illustrating the exclusive mechanism of national abjection.

Furthermore, writing on "the racist, patriarchal, and class exploitation of Asian (and other) immigrant women," Espiritu mentions how low English proficiency and thus limited job opportunities play into the job owner's hands who are inclined to exploit

female workers (90). She states, “They can pay low wages, ignore overtime work, provide poor working conditions, and fire anyone who is dissatisfied or considered to be a troublemaker” (qtd. in Espiritu, “Gender and Labor” 90). The poor working conditions and fear of losing the job together with insecure refugee status create more stress over the refugee women, as is the case for Huong. She becomes mentally fatigued over the years, which reflects itself as developing a moaning attitude toward children. As Rodriguez writes, “women must conceptualize how they fulfill their mother roles as both caretakers, fulfilling emotional and economic labor” because relocation carries “dilemmas of emotions” (212). In her effort to preserve a traditional family structure in Cong’s absence, Huong has difficulty in maintaining the balance between her mental and physical exhaustion and addressing the emotional needs of her children as a single mother. Feeling overwhelmed due to lack of emotional and physical support, she frequently reprimands the children: “You guys give me a headache—why can’t you be good?” (Eric Nguyen 77). In another example, where she rebukes Tuan for his misbehavior at school, she emphasizes her feeling of occasional inadequacy that stems from social pressures related to motherhood and their refugee status. Her reprehension also finds its reflections on children as feelings of guilt and shame, apparent in Tuan’s feelings when Huong rhetorically asks:

Did he know it made her look like a bad parent? What would everyone say about their household? That she raised a savage? An ingrate? It didn’t help that she was in this all alone—all alone. Those last words hurt him the most “You don’t have a father and your mother is in this all alone.” If she was alone, what did that make him? It stung him. And he didn’t know what to do with it; he didn’t want to feel that way ever again. (83)

Telling her children their father is dead, Huong uses Cong’s absent presence as an authority figure while raising the children. She uses the traditional Vietnamese family structure, which propagates the male and parental authority, as a means of power and control over the children. However, as the children grow, they start to have conflicts and disconnections with the contribution of their diverging identities. Although Huong’s guilt-tripping the children over Cong’s absence creates fear and stress for the children, their ambivalent emotions mixed with bitterness towards their father’s absence turn into frustration as they become teenagers. While Tuan joins the Southern Boyz, a Vietnamese

street gang to find acceptance and connection with his roots, Binh, becoming Ben leaves the house for self-discovery.

Regarding the Vietnamese women's tendency to keep the dynamics of the family system in the face of inevitable cultural changes during the assimilation process, Kibria points to the particular functions of the family system such as increasing chances of survival and mobility through corporate family investments and children's education (169). Furthermore, upholding the family solidarity works for the benefit of the Vietnamese woman in terms of emotional resilience. Huong, as a single displaced refugee woman, also walks, to use Kibria's phrase, the "ideological tightrope" to a certain extent (9). Kibria writes,

Vietnamese American women worked hard to incorporate the new realities of their lives into the ideological confines of the traditional family system. They walked an ideological tightrope—struggling to take advantage of their new resources but also to protect the structure and sanctity of the traditional family system. (109)

Even though they no longer have the traditional family structure in the resettlement, she uses family sanctity and her position as a single abject mother to establish her authority on the children and keep them together. Similarly, she incorporates particular benefits of living in America such as wage employment and leaning towards a more liberal worldview, which has generated as a result of her previous life experience with the increased repression under the Communist Party. Moreover, until she meets Vinh, a Vietnamese car salesman, she prioritizes the needs of her children as they grow up. Since it marks her realization of being overwhelmed by her responsibilities, the process that begins with Vinh can be considered as a dramatic turnover in her life in the US. The scene where they go for a test drive illustrates her responsibility fatigue as a result of her single refugee mother experience in a national abject position:

A sense of happiness came over Huong as she realized this was the first time in a long time she had left the city by herself. . . . She imagined leaving. Her boys were off at school and they would come home and wait and she would not be there! The next days they wouldn't go to school. They would stay home all week. They would fail their classes. The schools would visit. Not finding her there, they would call. *Ms. Tran*, they'd say, *how could you abandon your*

sons? Yes, abandon, and all at once she felt guilty for thinking it. How could she abandon her sons? How could she even think of doing that to them? They were all alone in the world. She was just weary; that's what it was—tired, old, and weary. (108)

With no intention or desire to leave her children, Huong goes through the cumulative effects of dislocation and single mothering while she is encumbered by the intersecting effects of gender, race, and class. Within a short time, Vinh begins living with them, first as a guest sleeping on Ben's bed. With no job, Vinh is unable to settle down as he fails in his attempts. Their Vietnamese roots bring them closer as Huong has "a vague feeling that they were the same type of people" (113). In a way, she compromises her emotional self-neglect for the survival of her family as Ben who is surprised by his mother's bringing a man to the house says, "She was not the type to believe in love. Love didn't pay the bills. It didn't cook dinner. It didn't provide for a family" (Eric Nguyen 119). Vinh's coming changes Huong's mood since "His mother was happy. As far as he knew, she was never happy" (118). The fact that Vinh has no job illustrates that Huong is in strong need of support and companionship after the long years of physical and emotional distress of mothering and refugeeness.

Huong's gradual departure from the selfless mother model accelerates with Ben's leaving home upon finding out Huong's lie about Cong's being alive. Ben's reaction reminds her of Cong's memory because the pain of her husband gives its way to confronting the irretrievability of the past and acceptance of her own mistakes: "'We're not the bad sons', Ben says. 'You're the bad mother.' He feels a weight lifted off his chest" (Eric Nguyen 187). On the one hand, his accusation represents the undesired outcomes of partial transmission of the past into the younger generation. On the other hand, the scene shows that although there is no chance of a complete disowning of the painful memory of war and loss in the resettlement, "moving forward" is possible. After two decades of living in the States, Huong, as a first-generation Vietnamese comes to an understanding that moving forward is the best way to cope with not only the past but also with the present as she thinks, "some things, they're lost, but what was lost is perhaps best forgotten. The past is the past" (Eric Nguyen 212). Despite her resentment after her children's moving away, she comes to an understanding: "She decided then: If being away from her brought

him happiness, who was she to stand in his way? Who was she to say no to her sons? That's what it came down to when it came to raising children: their happiness" (210).

Therefore, refugee motherhood within the context of the Vietnam War points to a variation in the general assumptions around motherhood. Although "the vulnerability, trauma, and victimhood" are familiar components of the lives of the displaced mothers, there are always the elements of "personal choice and agency" (Lombard 2). In a general sense, as a national abject single Vietnamese refugee mother, Huong exemplifies the human cost of the war where the hope of survival leads the way to take the risks and deal with the systematic racism. In particular, her struggle for survival as a single mother with two kids is also a form of resistance and empowerment against the social and political forces. The structural and psychological challenges do not deter Huong from fulfilling her responsibilities as a mother: "These are women who make decisions based on the promise of survival and perseverance" (Rodriguez 219). Huong inevitably becomes a part of exploitative labor industry and she deprives herself of autonomy to direct her life independently at least for a certain period of time. Her changing perception regarding motherhood and decision to respect her children's choices brings a freedom also for her. Her emotional empowerment does not necessarily save her from abjection neither as a single mother nor as a Vietnamese refugee. Yet, she displays resilience and determination dealing with her cumulative exhaustion and establishing a new life with Vinh.

4.2. DISPLACEMENT, EMPLACEMENT, VIETNAMESE GANG CULTURE

Things We Lost to the Water ends with a scene where Huong reexperiences the displacement again in New Orleans, hit by the Katrina Hurricane in 2005. In the midst of flood, waiting to be rescued, the narrative flashes back to the time when she was on the boat with Tuan: "The water, she realized, wasn't that bad. The waves, you got used to them. With time" (Eric Nguyen 289). Huong's thought at the time of the disaster projects her feeling of belonging to New Orleans after nearly three decades of living. Returning to the water metaphor in this context, the water embodies the duality of "escape" and "death" in Vietnamese history and experience. As Eric Nguyen himself puts it,

In a way, it felt natural for a Vietnamese American story to take place in Louisiana, and the state is a natural place to explore the symbolism of water — this thing that can both heal and harm you. But more than that, I wanted that water metaphor to speak to the things that have both of those properties. Like family, for instance, which can definitely nourish you, but which can also unexpectedly hurt you, which I think is the case for my characters. (Sarfes)

Therefore, the symbolism of water serves as a metaphor embodying both the risky and promising process started with their leaving Vietnam. For instance, Tuan's adjustment to the new country signifies a thorny process as he is subjected to bullying, stereotyping, and verbal abuse especially during his school years. As a 1.75 generation Vietnamese American—coming to the US when he is five years old—Tuan leans towards his Vietnamese roots, and ends his involvement with the Vietnamese street gang, the Southern Boyz. In *Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling: Vietnamese American Youth in a Postcolonial Context*, Kevin D. Lam examines “the dialectical relationship between large-scale forces like empire, immigration, war, and geopolitics with the particularities of youth gang formation” (10). Vietnamese American gang formation is a common occurrence in places with a higher percentage of Vietnamese populations such as San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Houston, and Boston (Long 322). Their criminal activities include crimes against people and property: “drug trafficking, money laundering, bribery, extortion, alien smuggling, home invasion, computer technology theft (including ‘smash and grab’ robberies at computer stores), credit card counterfeiting, prostitution, gambling, and occasionally, killing for hire” (322).

According to Lam, their Vietnamese existence is not recognized by the neither by the community leaders nor by the politicians while “[t]hese realities are overshadowed by stories of economic success, self-sufficiency, and educational attainment” (5). To put it otherwise, “the model minority” and “the good refugee” stereotypes are deployed and hinder the exploration of interwoven issues such as race, displacement, and poverty in the formation of such communities (6):

The effects and traumas of war, poverty, racism, and negative educational experiences drove some Vietnamese youth to the margins, and further fueled the formation of gang subculture. Gang subculture moved quickly from fundamental concerns regarding protection, self-preservation, and ethnic

pride to potentially lucrative, and oftentimes, illegal means. The rise of materialism in late US capitalist society and first-hand accounts of economic struggle in their own families, in many ways, accelerated the desire for working-class immigrant subjects to achieve material wealth and status (e.g., “street rep”) by any means and to get “a piece of the American pie.” (6)

After changing four different places—“the church, the Minhs’, the motel, and the cha xu’s house”—Huong finally settles in the Versailles Arms apartments with her sons, located on the eastern outskirts of New Orleans (Eric Nguyen 34). “It was a rule: you had to be ‘người Việt’ to stay in Versailles” (40). Harboring many people from different ethnicities, mainly Vietnamese, Versailles is a neighborhood with low-income households. Although it offers a space for solidarity and support for the refugee and immigrant families in the first place, its transformation in the negative sense is also worth noting, as Huong complains:

the obnoxious tourists in the Quarter, who she felt invaded an otherwise decent city; the other people who lived in Versailles—including those who moved away, abandoning their apartments and letting vines grow on the walls and bricks turn green, making a place where hooligans from all of New Orleans East trespassed to get high. (Eric Nguyen 128)

In this sense, the degeneracy in the Versailles can be taken as a factor leading to Tuan’s becoming a gang member. Stating that the gang formation appears in roughly 1970s-1990s, Lam indicates the social profile of the second wave of the Vietnamese refugees, who mostly consists of unaccompanied young boat people from rural and working-class unlike their upper class first wave counterparts (11). Tuan’s participation in the gang as the smart son of Vietnamese professor not only indicates the changing social class in displacement, but also other cultural and family factors affecting the younger generation Vietnamese American identity.

At first glance, it seems that the Southern Boyz provides an escape for Tuan, to whom, home is “where his mother was always tired, annoyed, or dissatisfied (something was always wrong)” (Eric Nguyen 128). On the other hand, “[t]he Southern Boyz offered the opposite of that—meaning camaraderie, family” (129). Thus, his gang involvement points to the disrupted family life and Tuan’s search for a supportive environment that he feels lacking in the family where his mother is physically and emotionally overwhelmed.

Vinh's becoming permanent in the house and discordant behavior also create a discomfort for Tuan at home. The absence of his father, not only affects him in emotional terms as a child losing his father, but it also impacts Tuan's improvement due to Cong's disappearing educator role. In this respect, two major events when he is eleven hint the changing course of his life: "he had to repeat sixth grade and his mother told him his father was dead" (67). A teacher from the school, Mr. Landowski fails Tuan in English claiming that Tuan "didn't think he knew English" (68). Contrary to Mr. Landowski's claim, Tuan argues that he "did know English" as it has been six years since they came to the US (68). Tuan describes Mr. Landowski's negative attitude, as someone who "had a temper and was easily flustered and gave bad grades that no one deserved" (68). In this regard, Mr. Landowski presents an opposite image to his father, whom he defines as "kind and gentle and patient" (68).

Critically, Tuan's act also signifies his desire for a feeling of belonging and identity for he faces racism and bullying during his school years. His situation illustrates the larger sociopolitical forces shaping the lives of Vietnamese American immigrant and refugee youth. His constant humiliation by other kids at school as the "dog eater" is one of those subtle examples where he is subjected to derogatory comments based on his racial background (Eric Nguyen 75). Donald Richard, a white kid from the neighborhood is the main villain in Tuan's life, symbolizing the racial stereotyping of Asians through his repeated harassment of Tuan. Donald's poor performance at school and family conflict inevitably influence his aggressiveness toward Tuan. Yet, his main motivation derives from the entrenched social hatred directed toward minority groups. The Mexican pronunciation of Tuan's name as "*Juan or Ja-uan*" and the use of racist stereotypes specific to Asians such as "Go back to China, Chinaman" (76) "small stuff" (80) are representations of "overt and covert racism" that are present in the Southeast and South Asian American students' education life (Ngo 61).

Tuan's own struggle as a teenager, growing up in a tough household contradicts the portrayal of Asian children as successful models, and thereby debunks the model minority myth. Their disrupted family, his mother's unhappiness due to emotional and physical challenges in diaspora, and Tuan's conflict in relation to all these factors bespeak the

impacts of war and imperialism on Southeast Asian people. Furthermore, their discursive construction as model minorities is a political strategy “to silence and contain Asian Americans even as it silences other racial groups” (Ngo and Lee 416). There is a binary classification of Southeast Asians relating to the stereotype: “On the one hand, Southeast Asians are lumped with other Asian American groups and viewed as part of the ‘model minority.’ On the other hand, they are portrayed as gangsters, high school dropouts, and welfare dependents” (Ngo 60). One of the results of this binary logic is “the denial of critical support” based on the belief that “they have no real need” or “they don’t deserve it” (Um, *A Dream Denied* 11). Even in some cases, the success of the Vietnamese students is tied to “the educational opportunities in the United States that are not available to them in Vietnam” (qtd. in Ngo and Lee 425). Significantly, these kinds of explanations are to promote their success through the American Dream (415). Nevertheless, the realities of refugee lives point to the prevailing political and socioeconomic inequities and racism. They prevent people from accessing resources that would improve the quality of their lives.

Tuan’s poor school performance and toxic school environment that end up in his involvement in the gang is based on structural forces of race and class, negatively affecting their access to funding, good teaching, and needed materials (Ngo and Lee 418). These systemic inequalities affect their access to better education opportunities and achieve his potential: “The kids at school were stupid like that. That was why he was there, for sure. They put all the stupid kids in one school, where he had to take remedial English (for the extra dumb, like he was) with Donald” (Eric Nguyen 74). Similarly, the scene where worms spread out from his lunch at school cafeteria while sitting with Donald and the others is important not only for the position it puts him into, but beyond that displays the tight economic situation, they are in. It is the leftovers from two nights before that Huong puts in his lunch box while having a grumble about their leaving food unfinished: “I don’t make food to go to waste:”

In the Tupperware, a black lump moved. By reflex, Tuan threw the container in the air. Tommy and Pete screamed but then laughed, an uncontrollable hooing and hollering. The noodles landed on the table and in them a cockroach moved. More came out of hiding. Everyone in the cafeteria stood up, not knowing whether to run toward the mess or away from the roaches. (81)

In the aftermath, where Tuan and Donald get into a fight and ends up in detention, Tuan's keeping it a secret can be interpreted as an extension of the precarious situation he experiences as a refugee child. In their previous fight, where Huong is called to come to the school, the embarrassment his mother felt as he remembers "her looking small in front of the teacher" and his mother's rebuke for defending himself physically put a pressure on him to be well-behaved: "You make yourself better than him by being a better student. . . . You don't hit anybody" (83). Within time, Tuan's feeling of embarrassment toward his mother's lonely struggle and her warning him about assuming silence as a defense mode, lead him to cope with these challenges by creating his version of justice such as involvement in a gang. Moreover, the feeling of happiness when he releases Donald's dog one midnight as a retaliation against Donald's bullying him is relevant to this matter.

Furthermore, Vietnamese cultural emphasis on "success" does not work in Tuan's case, either. He gets distanced him from school and ends up being a drop out. Instead, Tuan looks for his cultural ties in the gang membership where he is called "'Handy' because he was useful" (127). In the beginning, the feeling of support and protection within the Southern Boyz seems to offer him a sense of belonging and fulfillment. However, he recognizes the manipulation in the group, which is also apparent in his romantic relationship with Thao, a female gang member. After their first intercourse, he "felt used" (138). Yet, Thao's commitment to her Vietnamese roots unlike those opting Americanness, attracts him as she is aware of their being perpetual foreigners as national abjects: "We'll never be American enough for the people here. People look at us a certain way and they always will" (138). He empathizes what she says as it mirrors his sense of unbelonging and exclusion as he puts: "He's lived most of his life in New Orleans, yet there was always a feeling that he didn't belong" (138).

Yet, the incident that severs his relationship with the gang occurs when he fails to fulfill the duty of scaring an Asian grocery store from the neighborhood. Tuan is asked to intimidate and expel the old Chinese shop owner of Wei Huang Market which is seen as a threat to the Vietnamese businesses around:

She would run out of the store, arms waving in the air. Wei Huang would be closed the next day. It would disappear in the next week. It would be replaced

by another souvenir shop with tacky trinkets in a month. Tuan would be part of this strange violent family with a strange, violent history. He would create a new New Orleans. (135)

The affectionate attitude of Madame Wei and his realization of the group's psychological manipulation deter Tuan from hurting her. Tuan, as someone whose family flees violence and his being the close witness of his own mother's struggle, his actions do not reflect what he truly feels inside. One thing for certain is that he needs family affection. Lacking affection in his case is important to emphasize again the history of violence and the later circumstances the refugee families had to endure and experience as national abjects. As Lam writes, "[b]y all accounts, gang violence can be attributed to the consequences of war and migration, class inequalities, demographic shifts, and interethnic relations amongst racialized youth in a changing US political economy" (12). In this sense, an examination of Tuan's identity struggle is useful to illustrate the impacts of the war on the Vietnamese youth. His transformation and failure to achieve his potential is very much related to both the material and psychological challenges in the refugee lives as well as how the promises of liberation fail. To his parents, "their son was so smart—the professor's son" (Eric Nguyen 26).

At this point, it is important to underline the role of war and policy failures in the unresolved political conflicts that have precipitated the humanitarian crisis in postwar Vietnam. Huong's account offers a portrayal of pre-and-post war Vietnam. Her depiction presents how their daily lives and life in general in Vietnam are toppled with the changing sociopolitical dynamics in the country and how they have no choice but to leave it in the face of a decreasing chance of survival. Apart from the first group of Vietnamese refugees, coming mostly with the help of American aid, those coming with their own means have a "different story." In *Becoming Refugee American*, Phong Tran Nguyen mentions, "Because they had lived under communism and had firsthand experience with censorship, new economic zones, and reeducation camps, their stories conveyed a complexity and realism missing from both pro-and anticommunist propaganda" (54). Moreover, their risk-taking in the face of a deadly journey "spoke volumes about the society they could no longer tolerate" in the homeland after the Communist takeover. (54). After Cong's release from the reeducation camp, they first experience an internal

displacement, moving from Saigon to My Tho, Huong's hometown, for safety. Growing food in their garden, Cong starts to sell vegetables at the market:

How life was different for them now. In Saigon, Huong was the young wife of a professor and they were a professor's family. Now she and Cong rooted around in a country garden, the dirt getting under their nails, the scent of earth and insects and sun baking themselves into their clothes and skin. (28)

The transformation of life in part suggests the political marginalization of the Vietnamese people, starting in their own homeland. For instance, the economic program initiated by the Communist government illustrates the corruption while exploiting their agricultural labor propagating "to serve the people" (Eric Nguyen 30). When they start witnessing the disappearance of people in the neighborhood, who are replaced by the Northern Vietnamese, Cong, remembering his reeducation camp experience, becomes paranoid, and makes exit plans.

While migrating unaccompanied because of loss during the war is a common occurrence in Vietnamese American families, Cong's deliberate choice to stay in Vietnam has other implications, regarding the Vietnamese displacement. In this respect, not every movement is voluntary as Ronald Takaki writes, there are many Vietnamese who "see themselves as sojourners, hopeful they can return to their country someday" (455). Moved to South Vietnam as a child refugee, Huong tells, Cong "associated movement with loss. Since then, he had looked for a place to put down his roots—to stay" (Nguyen 25). Furthermore, in her conversation with Lan, Cong's new wife, Huong learns how Cong gets startled in the face of "[t]he coldness of the water" on that night (223). After being tortured at the reeducation camp, Cong decides Vietnam is no longer a "place for family" (224). However, his racial trauma during his brief stay in France and the lasting trauma in the face of violence at the camp constitute an immense psychological challenge for his migration.

Huong and Tuan's return to Vietnam for Cong's funeral signifies their cultural transformation in the US and makes them reconsider the validity of the American dream. Huong's first impressions when they land in Vietnam display the corruption in Vietnam as people deal with poverty: "They all looked the same: the small, tired, dirty. Huong felt

pity for them, then she felt guilty for feeling that way. They were her countrymen, and she was returning” (217). The way Vinh bribes the customs official is also humiliating when he does not take Huong’s make-up bag: “He threw a crumpled American bill at him, grabbed her bag, and moved her along” (217). In another instance where Huong is deceived by a panhandler who defines herself as Cong’s wife Lan, and takes Huong in the crowd asking for money show the conditions people are in present Vietnam (1999). She begs saying, “I have two kids to feed” (Eric Nguyen 218). As Theodore Ross asserts, “There are still brutal extremes of inequality in Vietnam, and a corrupt and repressive government that is almost universally regarded as opaque, sclerotic, and inept” (“Going Home”).

These circumstances are related to the abandonment of Vietnam to its own fate. The US entered a war that was doomed to be lost. As George Herring puts, “The ultimate losers were the South Vietnamese. Many of those who remained in Vietnam endured poverty, oppression, forced labor and ‘reeducation’ camps” (115). The flight becomes inescapable for many under these circumstances, bearing the element of agency in mind. A journey through the water, as mentioned earlier, offers rebirth but it is a threat due to its destructive qualities as a material force. Kristeva’s concept of “chora” offers a strong parallelism to the water metaphor in the novel due to the mobility and dynamism it connotes. Chora, associated with the mother’s womb in Kristeva’s formulation, points to both a blissful and chaotic state in a subject’s formation just as the ocean offers both freedom and threat. At the same time, chora is a liminal position that enables the subject to move toward becoming a member of the symbolic order just as the water offers a passage to survival.

Likewise, Huong and the children’s leaving Vietnam and effort to be a part of the American national body can be read within this context as an attempt to leave the chora—that could be associated with Vietnam—and come to terms with their fluctuating identities in the symbolic order of the US. Drawing on Kristeva’s theory, Kutzbach and Mueller think,

the chora must be abjected when the child enters the realm of culture, the law, and the Symbolic because it threatens the newly established borders of identity. Yet the abject, nevertheless, exerts a strong fascination because the

separated self yearns to be reunited with the maternal chora in spite of having rejected it. (264)

Life in Vietnam is chaotic during and after the war. It is also the place for comfort due to the familiarity. Becoming a part of America is also chaotic due to the social and economic challenges they experience as national abjects while it promises a reconciliation for finding a place to belong. The risk taken by Huong corresponds to the agency of the Vietnamese subject who steps into the symbolic order and establishes the boundaries of their abject identity. However, just as a clear-cut separation from the chora is not possible for the subject, a total disconnection from one's homeland is not realistic. Huong's initial impression on seeing where Cong and his family live propels her to go over her choice and see the possibilities of living in Vietnam if she had not left. Cong's relatively better financial situation compared to their average life in America cause a resentment in Huong: "Compared to Versailles, Lan's home was a palace" (Eric Nguyen 219). As she says, "It felt like an insult, this house" Huong thinks. "What you could have become, who you could have been, where you could have lived" (219). At this point, it is useful to review Herring's point on the realities that surround the Vietnamese in the displacement:

The popular stereotype of the Vietnamese-American was one of assimilation and overachievement. In reality many remained unassimilated and lived near or below the poverty line, depending on minimum-wage jobs or welfare. The new immigrants also endured alienation, encountered prejudice from Americans for whom they were a living reminder of defeat, and suffered from the popular image of the successful Asian, which implied that the unsuccessful had only themselves to blame. (115)

Going back to the war years, taking a look at their lives in Vietnam offers an account of how they have no choice but to take the risk in the hope of a better life in face of a corrupt system. In resettlement, however, the adaptation and success are harder to achieve contrary to the political rhetoric, considering race, class, gender-based discriminations. During their conversation where she learns that Cong and Lan met at the university where they both taught, Huong thinks that she could also have been the one who could have had a career "if only there hadn't been a stupid war" (222). She has mixed feelings of bitterness and envy towards Lan, being completely aware that it is an unjustified feeling and she would always be a housewife. Yet, as she continues to think of the destruction

and dispossession the war created, she rhetorically asks, “Had they thought about that when they started the war . . . that they were ruining so many lives?” (222)

Given that the model minority stereotype is a strategic maneuver aiming at masking the racism toward the Asians and other minority groups, it is important to emphasize the underlying message. According to Ngo, it encompasses “its affirmation of the US achievement ideology—the view that the US is the land of opportunity” (Ngo 60). Nevertheless, as Huong’s case shows, although it offers a temporary relief from the conflict, departing for “the land of opportunity” does not guarantee a peaceful and fulfilling life as they must overcome the structural inequalities and unresolved emotional issues as a family. In this respect, Huong’s version of the American dream consists of meeting the basic needs of living, to put it otherwise, survival: “It’s all American dream,” she says, “to earn a living, to provide for yourself” (Eric Nguyen 166).

The role of the US in the war and its abandonment of Vietnam must be emphasized for being the major factor in the disruption of lives and escape of the Vietnamese. Similarly, the 2005 Katrina Hurricane, causing another displacement in Huong’s family is also worth considering in terms of the model minority stereotype and abandonment of the Vietnamese community to its own fate again. The event is mostly discussed in terms of race because New Orleans was a predominantly black city (Leong et al. 771). Drawing attention to the presence of Vietnamese community in the South, Eric Nguyen says: “the thing about living in New Orleans East, where a lot of the Vietnamese in New Orleans live, is that people there share this feeling of being forgotten by the city even though they’re within city lines” (Kathy Ngoc Nguyen). The recovery of the Vietnamese dominated area through the community work is also attributed by the US media to the model minority myth, obscuring the intersections of the racial dynamics (Leong et al. 774).

4.3. ABSENT FATHER, SEXUAL IDENTITY, AND VIETNAMESE ROOTS

Within the context of belonging, national abjection, and model minority stereotype in Vietnamese diaspora, the younger son Binh’s case, who later defines himself as Ben,

offers a distinct examination in terms of his search and response to the absent presence of a father figure. Ben's process of identity formation occurs in two senses: First, he comes to discover his sexual identity, though he opts not to discuss and share it with his family. Second, the process of sorting out his identity crisis in a national sense takes longer time due to his liminal status as a second-generation Vietnamese who has grown up in the US in the shadow of an absent Vietnamese father. Compared to Tuan, as he has not even a memory related to him, the absence of a father figure affects Ben more: "Whatever else he knew of the man were echoes of would haves, could haves. *He would have thought this. . . he could have done this, your father. . .* Not a real-life father but a ghost of a father, an afterimage of a father" (Eric Nguyen 89).

Ben's father's absence also determines Ben's nonexistent relationship with Vietnam, the home country that he has no intention to connect—at least, for a certain period of time—and never visits. As a child, his first endeavor to establish a tie with his roots occurs through the Catholic church, "Our Lady of Saigon," yet only for the Vietnamese priest's fatherly attitude. Huong's harsh response toward Ben's involvement in the church, due to her personal stance toward any ideological institution tears him apart from establishing a link. Although Vinh's joining the family gives him a slight hope of finding a father figure to identify with, even thinking of the possibility of Vinh's turning out to be their real father, Ben gets disappointed within time, realizing Vinh's loser status. Simply put, the absence of a father figure affects Ben's psychological status negatively as he cannot find the support he needs from his mother.

James M. Herzog examines the aspiration for a father figure as "father hunger" as he states, "Children without fathers experience father hunger, an affective state of considerable tenacity and force. Father hunger appears to be a critical motivational variable in matters as diverse as caretaking, sexual orientation, moral development, and achievement level" (174). Similarly, Ben's desire for a father manifests itself as a need for identification and affirmation. Ben lacks a father as a parent, and thus a father figure-role model due to the Vietnam War. His national abjection in the background, Binh (Ben) tries to recognize his place in the society. Although he compensates for the lack of

guidance with other people he met at some phases of his life, the lack of a paternal figure enforces the turbulences of his already abject identity and adds to his search for identity.

Huong's unrealized expectations from her children in general are more related to her own unresolved internal issues with her husband's absence. Its reflections on the children, however, become oppressive and negatively affect Ben's struggle for identity formation. Thinking that his father is dead throughout his childhood and teenage years, Ben is uncomfortable with the low self-esteem it creates on him as a social impression. The lack of emotional support also prevents him from admitting his inner desire to know his father: "He was tired of pity. It was the same reason he never said it aloud that he would have wanted to know more about his father beyond the vague descriptions his mother gave, to have just one glimpse—for curiosity's sake, of course" (Eric Nguyen 156). In "Gender Identity and Self-Esteem of Boys Growing up Without A Father," Geertje de Lange states that, it is rather "family unhappiness" that causes low self-esteem in the fatherless children than "an absent father," affecting the child's self-esteem (101). Aside from her crucial role in ensuring the survival of the family, his mother's role in Ben's early development mostly consists of nagging and comparing him with others. As a single parent who has to shoulder all the financial and psychological burden of parenting, Huong has difficulty in handling her children's needs and feelings.

Thus, there is an undeniable contribution of the father figure in the child's "cognitive, sexual, emotional and social functioning" (Domotor 69). The absence of a father figure and Ben's confusion related to his identity can also be examined in terms of theories of the psychosexual development of a child. Kristeva's theory of subjectivity, related to the mother and father's imaginary function in identity formation, is useful. In her account, the child identifies with the father, "the 'paternal' position—the differentiation, distance, and prohibition that produces meaning" (Kristeva, *Tales* 29). The father figure is not necessarily the real father but a third-party figure that causes the separation between mother and child. This figure also serves as "a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'" (Kristeva, *Desire* 238). To put it simply, the child needs the intervention of a third figure, in most cases a father figure to achieve a healthy separation from the mother

and become an autonomous, speaking subject. In its absence, the child “conceives of its Being in relation to some void, a nothingness” (Kristeva, *Desire* 238).

It can be stated then that the father figure—even if it is a symbolic figure—plays a critical role in shaping the identity formation of a child, including the gender and racial. In other words, the child is partly deprived of guidance that is important in their personal, emotional, and social development in the Symbolic Order. Ben’s desire for a father figure and his emotional response to his absence varies at different stages of his life as it evolves from an aspiration for his presence to frustration because of his absence. Cong’s failure in fulfilling his duty as a father, due to the war and its aftermath determines the course of Ben’s life, in an adverse way. In the absence of a third figure, he looks for a model to identify with in his development as a refugee. On the process of identification with the nation state, Lisa Lowe argues that

the American nationalist narrative of citizenship incorporates the subject as male citizen according to a relationship that is not dissimilar to the family’s oedipalization, or socialization, of the son. In terms of the racialized subject, he becomes a citizen when he identifies with the paternal state and accepts the terms of this identification by subordinating his racial difference and denying his ties with the feminized and racialized “motherland.” (56)

In this context, the act of changing his name from Binh to Ben is a step towards disowning his national heritage, thus his Vietnamese identity. As a second-generation Vietnamese who is born in a refugee camp in Singapore and has a Vietnamese father, he never knows, Ben does not feel any connection to his origins. Therefore, his attitude can be considered a denial of his racial identity, defined over his identification with the paternal state of the US. It soon becomes clear that this citizen model is specific to the white male and heterosexual definition of identity as Lowe portrays and it contradicts with Ben’s effort to form an identity for himself as a racially disadvantaged or national abject queer Vietnamese American.

James M. Herzog writes that “the father is also crucial in the formation of the child’s sense of self and consolidation of core gender identity” (173). Psychoanalytic theory points to the role of the father in child’s recognition of his/her/their sexual difference through a symbolic castration in the Oedipal phase. This also heralds the child’s assuming

a masculine gender role. At a point in the developmental phase, the child who first identifies with the mother then shifts towards the father, adopting his masculine attributes (Tyson 182). However, these assumptions suggest that the absence of a father and son relationship may lead to the same sex behavior, neglecting the social constructedness of these gender roles and biological basis of sexual orientation. In her research on the effect of the father's absence on male children, Geertje de Lange indicates the socioeconomic status and parental conflict as the potential reasons for developing a more feminine identity for the male children in the absence of fathers (100).

During his high school years, it is Howie, a white guy Ben meets at the swimming pool as the third figure—in psychoanalytic sense—that leads Ben to realize his sexual orientation. Seeing Howie naked, Ben tries to define his feelings toward him: “Awe? Excitement? Wonder?” (Eric Nguyen 152) Among these complex emotions towards Howie, Ben describes his feeling as “*Wanting*” (152). As he thinks, “what a strange feeling, what a queer idea to have toward another person! You could want food, you could want rest, you could want safety, and—it dawned on him—you could want a person, too” (152). Ben's way of tackling his sexual emotions through basic human drives such as hunger and need for warmth supports his same-sex desire as a natural fact just like other biological needs.

Howie introduces Ben to American writers he did not know at the time. Therefore, Howie mediates Ben's way through the larger forces of racism. For example, when he fails in math, the teacher uses the issue of the stereotype that “Asians are good at math.” He says, “just ask your pa for help. I bet he's a smart man” (149). His awakening interest in literature through Howie helps him break down the racial stereotype in that sense.

Within time, Ben's interest in literature and writing draws him closer to his father, considering Cong's literature background. However, Ben cannot commit himself to school during his early school years since he does not find it engaging. His lack of enthusiasm toward school is taken for “stupidity and laziness” by the teacher that results in his becoming a failing student (149). His unsuccessful school career is an example of

how the absence of his father, a professor himself leads Ben to lack a proper guidance in his education life.

Nevertheless, the absence of a father figure in racist American society causes an incomplete transition into the symbolic image of the United States. During an infant's process of becoming subject, the lack of a "loving father figure—Kristeva features a "loving father" in contrast to "Lacan's stern authoritarian father"—creates a problem for their overcoming the abjection and "mov[ing] to the Symbolic" (Oliver 51). In other words, the absence of Cong with Huong's emotional unavailability marks a border status for Ben who stays as an object, without a sense of stable identity.³⁵ The liminal status exempts him from belonging to the American society that he tries to conform to. When he discovers that his father was alive all this time, Ben could not overcome his feeling of betrayal by his mother and leaves home. In his conversation with his older brother after fleeing the home, he says,

It's like, I don't know, I've been seeing a ghost my entire life and now I finally see him, have proof of him—but I can't grasp him, can't show him to anyone else. But that ghost is more than just some dead man, some stranger. It's me. Or part of me. All my life it feels like a part of me has always been gone, a ghost. (Eric Nguyen 193)

Ben's abandonment of home can be compared to that of his father. Ben's annoyance with his mother mostly derives from his being deprived of his own self and reality which is closely related to his father. His separation from home is a way to punish his mother. Nevertheless, it gives him the opportunity to follow his free spirit. His independence/separation from home—symbolically reading, separation from the mother—brings him closer to himself, as he starts to trace his father, whom he closely resembles.

Ben starts to work as a housekeeper in the house of an academic couple, the Schreibers. Although it seems to be an ordinary coincidence to find a job beside a professor and to run errands for him, Mr. Schreiber who is also a literature professor, plays an important

³⁵ Oliver states that Kristeva's concept of imaginary father is "the combination of mother and father" (51). In other words, she does not make a sexual distinction in terms of the functions of parents in the child's formation of subjectivity.

role in Ben's intellectual development as a mentor and father figure. Recognizing Ben's interest in literature, the professor—a German minority himself—helps Ben return to the school that he left out of option. At first, Ben does not feel uncomfortable with the professor's attention to him, refusing to be treated as sort of “some monkey” due to his internalized outsider feeling: “He must have seen him as some type of novelty, Ben thought: an immigrant boy who dropped out of high school who cleans houses (one house) and reads books” (Eric Nguyen 198). Not believing in the sincerity of the professor's intentions, Ben thinks “of the tourists in the Quarter, pointing and staring at everything. The professor was no better” (198).

Yet, Ben benefits from not only the intellectual but also the bureaucratic ties of Mr. Schreiber who realizes his potential. Through the professor's initiation and references, he gets into the University of New Orleans as a freshman in a literature department. After a while, Ben decides to create a different path for himself as the feeling of gratitude starts to feel like a betrayal of his roots and his own talent. He starts his self-discovery process by rejecting the professor's offer to enter a PhD program in New York through one of his acquaintances. Ben defends himself against the negative reaction of the professor, saying that “it was time he got some life experience, to spread his wings on his own, to fly” (245). As he further continues:

For the last four years, Ben had been grateful for all that Schreiber had freely given to him. Yet there was the feeling of incurring debts—debts that he could never repay. It was unfair to the professor, who acted like a father to him. It was unfair to his own father, who never had the chance to know him. (Eric Nguyen 245)

Instead, Ben plans a journey to France. Transgressing the physical and symbolic borders of the country seems to be a better response to the professor's generous support. In this respect, Ben's move simultaneously enables him to move away from his position as a national abject and a diversion from the socially and politically enforced expectations within fixed categorizations. He is aware that he is bound to face the racist stereotyping. The familiar experience is also apparent in the scene where Mr. Schreiber invites Ben to a celebration dinner with his graduate students one night as he sees Ben equivalent to “their intellectual level” (199). Learning that Ben gets an acceptance and a scholarship to

the SCMLA, one of his students, Cardigan expresses his dissatisfaction with explicitly racist undertone:

These Chinese kids. And you'd think they'd just stick in the sciences and math and all that junk and you think just because you're an English major, you're safe because these kids, these always-lucky kids, don't even know English. It's not even their first language. But Ben here, Ben, buddy ol' boy—if that's even his real name—he proved us wrong! He got a scholarship ride here, and now he's going to South Central! (203)

Both Ben's decision and the student's remarks echo Mimi Nguyen's notion of the indebtedness promised under the self-interested claims of the American nation. She writes, "To give a blow, to give life, to give death—the gift is itself a surface on which power operates as a form of subjection" and the bondage to the giver, she continues in another paragraph "holds the giftee fast, as these powers produce his or her possible desires, movements, and futures" (8). Taken as a "gift," the professor's support for Ben brings out a conditional positioning, shaped according to the professor's career plan for him. In this way, it is safe to assume that a deserved success can easily be taken as unjust, as Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janelle Wong also warn about the overuse of the model minority stereotype to "undermine demands for equality for all" in their recent discussions of the affirmative action in college admissions ("Affirmative Action").

With his father's death news, Ben develops a curiosity toward his father: "I wonder," said Ben, "if he's read anything I've read" (237). In Paris, where his father had also lived, he thinks he would trace his absent father and get inspiration for his writing. It was "to know more about his father, a French literature professor, to connect with him in some deep way" (257). Things do not go as planned, however, as Ben goes through some sort of a writer's block and feels like a foreigner. Even though his separation from home empowers him to attain self-knowledge to a certain extent, a complete disconnection from the family in the physical and psychological sense—the semiotic in Kristevan sense—holds him back from productivity and self-expression. "[W]hen he got to Paris, he hadn't a clue what to write! His words failed him," writes Eric Nguyen (245).

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva writes, "For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous.

Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation” (27-28). It is the father’s function, as the third figure to introduce the child to language and society. Therefore, “the position of speaking subject is structurally paternal: one must take the father-figure as the idealized bearer of the separateness, unity, autonomy, and distance to which one aspires (not necessarily the biological father, but someone taken to embody these qualities)” (Stone 4). The subject’s struggle to attain them marks a “subjectivity-in-process” (4). Nevertheless, language has semiotic and symbolic aspects, consisting of drives and impulses of the maternal space and a more structured aspect of the paternal space, shaped by syntax rules.

Paris does not provide him with a productive space that motivates him into writing. He gets disappointed seeing that Paris is far from being the years long advocated ideas of “independence and liberty” (249). The material conditions offer a contrast to what he imagines: “the nights were cold, the streets smelled like urine, and the average Parisian was rude and just as idiotic as any American” (Eric Nguyen 249).

A meaningful literary expression cannot be solely built on one aspect of language since “the maternal realm supports and shades into the paternal” (Stone 4). Ben never captures a feeling of belonging in France. Nevertheless, for Ben, and the second-generation Vietnamese, it is the search and agency to make a choice itself matter since “the speaking being is not a stable subject. He or she is something else altogether: a subject in process” (McAfee 38). Therefore, his feeling of being a “foreigner” in France is different from feeling like a foreigner in America as he emphasizes “there was some choice in this matter. . . His immigration to Paris was a story made of flesh and bones written by himself, and no matter how terrible things turned out, he was the one who wrote it. That was the important part—to be the writer of his own story” (Eric Nguyen 249). Moreover, his phone call in the last scene of the book, where Huong got stuck on a roof during the Katrina Hurricane is a promising step for family reunion and reconciliation.

4.4. CONCLUSION

Inspired by his family's own refugee story, Eric Nguyen offers a reading of a mother and son(s) relationship in the Vietnamese refugee context through a single refugee mother. Huong, the refugee mother of two, has to balance the emotional and physical needs of her children alone. Although the Vietnamese men experience steep downward mobility that brings an additional economic burden on the Vietnamese women in diaspora, the disruption of family also puts an emotional burden on the refugee woman. Huong exemplifies the nationally abject refugee woman who has to overcome the conflicting forces of capitalism and the weight of Vietnamese cultural values in terms of motherhood alone. By earning a living for the family and raising her children alone, she overcomes the negative connotations of her national abject position and refuses to be trapped by the miserable, pathetic refugee image. Her moving away from sacrificial motherhood mode and past is also a liberation from the repressive patriarchal and cultural forms.

Like the daughter protagonists in this dissertation, the refugee sons also have different responses to their responsibilities as dutiful sons. Tuan and Ben exemplify different ways of coming to terms with the Vietnamese identity. The absence of past knowledge constitutes a big problem for Tuan and Ben (Binh) as it does for the protagonists Cherry and Mai in the previous chapters. The lie about their father's whereabouts complicates their relationship with Huong and their sense of identity. Tuan, as a 1.75 generation Vietnamese responds to his nationally and socially marginalized position in the US by joining a Vietnamese gang and developing his rebellious feelings towards his mother and environment. The Vietnamese gangs, a common phenomenon among the Vietnamese youth epitomizes a kind of revolt against their national abject position as a community in the US. It is also the product of the inequities of all forms mentioned under the national abjection theory. Tuan's looking for identity and national belonging through the gang illustrates one of the outcomes of the war and displacement on Vietnamese families. Moreover, the waste of his potential, becoming a dropout disrupts the successful refugee stereotype.

For the second-generation Ben, name change—from Binh to Ben—is an act of disowning his Vietnamese identity. Yet, choosing the American identity does not offer a solution for him since he is not a white heterosexual male. The absence of past knowledge both regarding his homeland and father lead him to get into an identity search through various institutions such as church and people like Prof. Schreiber. The absence of a father figure, one of the bitter consequences of the Vietnam war on the refugee child, constitutes an important part of his self-discovery in sexual and national terms. His desire for an authority figure to identify with essentially shows his effort to be an ordinary member of American society as a disadvantaged and national abject queer Vietnamese American. Ben leaves his mother's home and engages in a physical and metaphorical journey through which he hopes to overcome his sense of identity loss. At the end, he does not have definite answers to his confusion. Yet, the search itself offers promise and marks Ben as a Kristeva subject-in-process.

CONCLUSION

Refugee populations emerge as a result of conflicts that usually start locally and turn into global ones. The Vietnam War—or the American War, as refugee scholars refer to it—is a critical turn both in American and Southeast Asian histories. The refugee rhetoric by the American government is built on a rescue discourse that characterizes the refugee people over their victimization. In the Vietnamese case, the American national narrative over the politics of liberation and the pathetic Vietnamese refugee image displays itself as a mechanism of denial of the defeat in Vietnam. This dissertation examined the ways the Vietnamese refugees are marginalized and rendered silent in return for a refuge. Through the refugee experiences revealed in the selected works, written by the younger generation Vietnamese, a counter example to the earlier works is provided against an account of the war for the American public. They delve into the abject history by benefitting from the abject quality of literature and talk about the broader impacts of the war.

All the novels in this dissertation were treated as pieces written against the symbolic and literal erasure of Vietnamese American identity. The political and racial dynamics that generate the erasure and exclusionary circumstances are explored mainly through the lens offered by critical refugee studies and the national abjection theory by Karen Shimakawa. The complex aspects of Vietnamese displacement also require a discussion of related topics under this framework, such as refugee camp experience, gang formation, and ethnic enclaves. Broadly speaking, Asian American identity signifies a national abject identity, for it is perceived as a threat to national unity in America with their increasing numbers. Thus, Asian American history bears witness to various discriminatory legislations such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Johnson-Reed Act, and the Executive Order 9066. The Vietnamese American refugee experience was the focus of this dissertation due to its critical place in American history and recent growth of literary production by the Vietnamese youth. The younger generation of Vietnamese American authors offers a representation of their parents' experiences from a first-hand account, exposing the various impacts of displacement and war. In doing so, they provide complex and

multifaceted implications of Vietnamese displacement as opposed to the dominant narratives written on behalf of them.

The principles of the American nation-state include a contradictory treatment of the refugees. The promise of inclusion is conditional, based on their assimilation under the model minority and good refugee stereotypes. While assimilation is not a choice for the first-generation Vietnamese, social, cultural, and economic barriers hinder their adjustment processes. Apart from examining the conditions of these contradictory processes of social exclusion and inclusion, this study takes a look at how the first-generation refugees dealt with these conflicts and struggles. Their responses to their positions as national abjects vary, depending on the contexts of exit from Vietnam and their current social status in the host country. While some look for the pragmatic ways to fit in and become Americanized such as Dinh in *Short Girls* and Huong in *The Things*, others maintain a nostalgic relation to their homeland, like Hung in *The Reeducation*, and Minh in *The Lotus*. The variety of responses by different characters in these novels does not make it possible to reach generalized assumptions regarding the attitude of the first generation toward war and displacement.

The past points to a troubled space for the characters in these works, whether it be due to secrets, failures, trauma, or regrets. The major effect of the silenced past manifests itself on the continuous struggle of the younger generation through their identity, while some of them are children refugees themselves. In response to their parents' pressure to achieve in American society while maintaining their cultural values, the younger generation Vietnamese usually develops rebellious feelings and experiences alienation from their families and roots. This dissertation argued that their conflicting identities and their rugged relation with their "abject" history enable a reconstruction and redefinition of the Vietnamese experience from their own perspectives. While reconciliation and healing are not the ultimate goals, the search for their identities in the process provides a valuable step to acknowledge and celebrate their unique Vietnamese American identities with all its various aspects.

This dissertation was divided into four chapters under three main titles: 1. Displacement, emplacement, 2. Gender, 3. Identity. Each chapter featured a different aspect of the Vietnamese refugee experience. Chapter 1 discussed how the Vietnamese refugee experience is shaped in a white dominated state through the metaphorical significance the short stature holds for the Vietnamese people. Chapter 2 mostly focused on the refugee women's experience, including the camp space. Chapter 3 was built on the reckoning of a former Vietnamese soldier with his past and his war-traumatized child. Lastly, Chapter 4 brought the experience of a single refugee mother into focus while recognizing the literal and symbolic value of water for the Vietnamese. These works feature how these refugee families experience the discriminatory practices in their daily lives and present the stances of the younger generation on the lasting effects of dislocation. These effects, passed down to the younger generations, clearly demonstrate "abjection as an ongoing project rather than a historically isolated aberration" (Shimakawa 79). Therefore, national abjection reveals different modes of exclusion and inclusion, thereby laying the basis for the racialization and discrimination of the Vietnamese refugees. The US government and society placed the Vietnamese refugee subject into the national abject position for perceiving them as economic and racial burdens to the system.

Chapter One examined the effects of national abjection through a symbolic reading of the Vietnamese body as a source of a feeling of inadequacy in *Short Girls*. The Luong family living in Michigan represents one of those refugee families who have internalized white supremacy with which they are surrounded. Unlike the first-generation refugee parents in this dissertation, who assumed gratitude, not assimilation, as a general attitude to fit in the American society, Dinh Luong refuses social participation and engages in a kind of social withdrawal against inequality of opportunity in American society. In their garage, Dinh dedicates himself to designing props such as the Luong Arm, the Luong Eye, and the Luong Wall to ease the lives of short people.

Returning to critical refugee studies that aims to reflect on the circumstances the US War creates for the refugee subject, Bich Minh Nguyen explores the refugee abject through the characters living in a white dominated state, Michigan. The novel portrays the impacts of systematic and structural racism through the perspective of the older and younger

generation of Vietnamese. Circumstances not only determine their low living standards, but also affect their self-perception negatively. Dinh Luong, as the father of the Luong family, tries to distance himself from the abject stereotypes by rejecting what the state requires of him: Achieving a model minority status through hard work. As a part of this resistance, he also refuses to become an American citizen, though he has the right. In other words, the effects of national abjection at the societal level propels him into social isolation. Yet, Dinh Luong's projects are his way of achieving the American Dream. His starting point is his short height, an evident marker of Vietnamese identity. Dinh tries to prove himself not only on a personal but also on a public level as a Vietnamese abject refugee who believes in reversing the limited opportunities for the Vietnamese through individual effort. Thus, Dinh's rejection of naturalization also illustrates his effort to become a nationally respected inventor, not as an inferior but as an equal American. With success, he thinks his Asian looks could be left in the shadow of his inventor identity and he could come up with a whole new class in which race loses its significance. His efforts are directed at earning recognition to overcome his perception as a national abject, and his rejection corresponds to an exercise of agency that helps Dinh stay away from the abjectifying state.

Dinh's daughters, Van and Linny, members of the 1.25 and 2nd generation Vietnamese, experience the weight of national abjection psychologically and internalize the feeling of inferiority that comes mainly from their father. His feeling of inadequacy due to their short stature instills in the girls the idea that they are deficient and they have to compensate for it somehow. It inevitably affects their emotional and material lives, especially the trajectory of their lives. The elder daughter, Van, assumes the dutiful daughter role as an exemplary student and becomes a lawyer. Van also has a desire for recognition similar to her father's. Her marriage to a rich fourth-generation Chinese from law school also contributes to Van's effort to achieve a high social status. However, Van's fragile self-conception, built on her success as a lawyer and her marriage to a wealthy person, causes self-alienation. When she loses an important immigration case and her husband decides to divorce her, Van experiences a collapse.

Linny responds to the racial and cultural abjection of their family by choosing assimilation into the wider society. Starting from a very young age, Linny emulates the Western standards of beauty through her trendy make-up techniques and dressing. Moving to Chicago as a city girl and working at a diner, Linny goes against her family's wishes by discontinuing her education. Despite her confident look, though, Linny also has a very fragile self-conception that is threatened by a confrontation with a good-looking woman with smooth skin and average height. Remembering the theorization that "abject remains on the periphery of consciousness," it can be stated that Linny struggles with a feeling of doubt as a national abject. Building her identity on her attractiveness, Linny navigates her relationships mostly through physical attraction. Exhausted by the lack of emotional connection, however, she develops a desire to build a more intimate one at one point. Linny's relationship with the husband of one of her customers—a married white man—starts to turn into an aspiration for Linny, who finds herself wanting to have everything held by the white wife. Both Linny's and Van's yearnings indicate the impact of the family on one's self-concept, which is critically shaped on the basis of the wider sociocultural politics. While Dinh Luong refuses to be a part of national abjection mechanisms, he himself inadvertently abjects the inherited traits of his Vietnamese identity. This chapter displayed the impact of lower social class, the desire to determine one's self-perception, and the degree of the effort to overcome these psychological and economic barriers through the exploration of the refugee subject.

Chapter Two illustrated the complexity of displacement in terms of sex/gender through the camp and resettlement experiences of Cherry's extended family in *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*. Trinh—her aunt-in law—is exposed to constant rape by the guards in a Malaysian refugee camp. She represents one of those refugee women who are exposed to gendered precarious conditions in the abject camp space in the absence of international humanitarian law. To protect her son, Trinh exhibits a small degree of autonomy within the tent by threatening the guards to publicly shame them against their implications to rape the child. Nevertheless, her inevitable abjection in the bodily sense as a woman exemplifies the physical and psychological marks displacement left on the refugee subject in the camp space. The mismanagement of the transit process and the precarity it creates for the refugees can be treated as the early signs of national abjection. The criticality of

refugees as propaganda figures for the Western governments and the media generates a collective ignorance toward their humanity. Their disregarded human conditions underlie many decisions by the first-generation Vietnamese themselves, including the present issues the Vietnamese youth struggle with today.

The family portrayal also includes everyday life details that the Vietnamese refugee subject employs to rebuild a life in the face of exclusionary mechanisms. Particularly, the female refugee plays a critical role in overcoming the psychological and material hardships their national abject status causes. Cherry's paternal grandmother Hoa, a tradwife, dedicates herself to reestablishing a life in France. Cherry's maternal grandmother, Kim Ly, on the other hand, features a completely different type of refugee woman. As a businesswoman, she runs a salon. The novel seems to suggest that the refugee experience affects individuals differently, especially depending on what parts of their Vietnamese culture they choose to cherish and how they employ them in the new culture. Hoa chooses to maintain her traditional gender role, which weakens her autonomy in the new culture, whereas Kim Ly chooses to continue her career as an entrepreneur to navigate between two cultures. Hoa, as a passive dependent woman, gains authority only when her husband Hung loses his consciousness as a result of dementia. Kim Ly preserves strong ties with the Vietnamese culture but she uses the old values to chide the younger generation members. For instance, Cherry's mother's rejection of filial obligation constitutes a reason for Kim Ly, who constantly taunts her. Kim Ly's conventional attitude places her as a despotic figure who usually mishandles family matters and maintains her control over the family, mostly through her material influence and position as the elderly family member. Therefore, the way she uses her power against the other women in her family is highly problematic. Yet, it shows that each generation's response to survive represents and opens new wounds in the refugee psyche.

Despite the fact that they seem to have opposite characters, both Hoa and Kim Ly are very close in their response to the forces of abjection by holding their families together. They are strong refugee women who take charge of family matters in their own ways to protect their family members. Hoa's perseverance and daily efforts to maintain the order of the home play a pivotal role in her family's adaptation to France. Kim Ly shoulders

the responsibility of her family both by employing her family members and providing them financial support, when necessary. On the one hand, their actions stand against the abject stereotype that features the Asian woman as passive and dependent. On the other, they deploy their national abject status to their own benefits in their unique ways.

The chapter also explored the racist reception and persisting racial dynamics at the microlevel through the relationship between the Truong and Bourdain families in France. The sponsor family, the Bourdains, have a symbolic sympathy toward the Truongs, whom they regard as a reparation for their colonial past. Thus, ironically, their sponsorship is based on their motivation to finish the incomplete business of their colonial ancestors. When the Truongs' granddaughter is impregnated by the Bourdains' son, the Truong family is reminded sternly of their position as national abjects.

Therefore, the displacement and resettlement processes of Cherry's refugee family both in the US and in France demonstrate the consequences of the war and limited options for the war refugee. The pressure of past choices, whether it be voluntary or involuntary, shapes the lives of the Truong and Vos families extensively. The strategic forgetting of the past is a general tendency in both families, even if they feel the impact of previous decisions. To this, the weight of family and cultural expectations is added on the younger members of the Truong and Vos families since the parents demand a recompense for their sacrifices. First, Cherry responds in a positive way to her parents' demand by being a responsible daughter and student. She is a foreigner/stranger to Vietnamese roots. The cultural dissonance she feels when she goes to Vietnam to bring her brother back also contributes to her jettisoning of Vietnamese-ness. Nevertheless, her realization that family history is only partially told by her parents brings a new understanding of both her identity and existence. It is important to note that the subjective family story presents their survival effort, including limited life chances for the refugees.

Cherry's exploration of the past as a second generation corresponds to an abjection for facing the knowledge the previous generation refuses to confront. However, Cherry's defiant mode positions her as abject since she starts to pose a threat to the national narrative and well-being of her family by going after repressed and hidden history. The

exploration of history equals going against the systematic historical erasure employed by the US government. Thus, as a representative of the second-generation Vietnamese, Cherry benefits from the abject quality of Vietnamese history to overcome the glitch in her self-conception and to celebrate Vietnamese history. Her confrontation with the impossibility of occupying a fixed and coherent identity as someone with her dual identities position her as a Kristevan subject whose subjecthood is in process.

Chapter Three examined the refugee experience through South Vietnamese masculinity, the ethnic enclaves, and the traumatized identity struggle of a 1.25 generation Vietnamese in *The Lotus and The Storm*. The realities of the Vietnamese refugee experience hugely differ from Western national narratives constructed by the West that are often built on partial information and inaccurate representations. The losses experienced by the Vietnamese cannot be compensated for by the gains, as is presented by Western governments. Featuring the fictional account of a former South Vietnamese soldier, the novel focuses on the ontological crisis in the US psyche through race and gender dynamics during the Vietnam War. The intersection of the two shapes the masculinity experiences of American and Vietnamese men during the war and can be interpreted as the first steps of their position as national abjects in America.

Minh's account shows how the personal and political interests of the American policymakers based on masculinity adversely affected the course of the war for individuals and nations. At one point, the continuation of the war turns into a testimony of American manhood, showing itself as an intensifying military power and emasculation of the Vietnamese man in decision-making processes. The assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem is a significant example of national abjection by the US government in Vietnamese territory. The US support of the coup shows a clear case of denial of the Vietnamese capacity to govern itself and its response against the perception of threat to its sovereignty. The US self-representation of itself as a rescuer, despite its defeat, can also be taken as an effort to recuperate its wounded masculinity. As it is seen in the treatment of the relations with Cliff, Cao does not portray US-Vietnam relations from an antagonistic perspective.

Ideological divisions between the North and South Vietnamese forces are also given through the personal relationships in the novel. Deception, betrayal, and loyalty are recurring concepts that feature the personal and political relations between Minh and others. For instance, Phong and Minh's friendship, illustrating the division, shows the entanglement of personal desires with political interests. Years later, Minh's confrontation with Phong for Phong's betrayal of him as a Viet Kong and affair with Quy before his death suggests the significance of confrontation for reconciliation in the general sense. Minh exemplifies the Vietnamese masculine identity, who is nationally abjectified by the North Vietnamese and the US military members.

Moreover, living in a neighborhood consisting mostly of minorities, Minh and Mai not only benefit from but also contribute to racial and ethnic minority support. Their accounts regarding the residents of the Sleepy Hollow Manor offer witness to their dealing with national abject conditions. In a system where they experience great social and economic inequity, the neighbors, consisting of various groups, unavoidably engage in illicit ways of money making in the wider American society. However, their own relations depend on mutual support. Therefore, their cooperation represents the resistance and survival effort of the racialized abject groups. Hui, a Vietnamese community-based system of savings and loans, is also a part of this endeavor to protect themselves against their abject status. It represents their response to the nation's social and economic system, into which they are denied complete inclusion. Furthermore, Minh and Mai's relationship with the Vietnamese caretaker, Mrs. An is another example of this kind. They help Mrs. An pay her debt due to her son's gambling. These examples illustrate the abject conditions resulting from unequal rights and limited opportunities, and they debunk the idea of US as an egalitarian country.

Speaking of Vietnamese agency, it is important to mention the significance of ethnic enclaves in the resettlement processes of the refugees. From its location, typically found on the outskirts of the cities, Little Saigon characterizes the Vietnamese being rendered national abject both spatially and socially. Nevertheless, Little Saigon, as an example of abject space, also signifies cultural resistance against the dispersal policy that aims to prevent racial cooperation. In other words, support and cooperation among the

community members symbolize their response to erasure and assimilation. Claiming the abject setting through community events and using it as a resource for jobs and accommodation illustrates various survival mechanisms of the Vietnamese in a material and emotional sense against social and emotional dispossession.

The third part of this chapter analyzed Mai's divided identity as a result of her experience of war and personal losses related to the family and Vietnam. As a child, Mai witnesses the death of her sister in front of her eyes in an assassination attempt targeting their father. After this traumatic experience that threatens the boundaries of her existence, Mai goes through dissociative identity disorder (DID), and her first identity split occurs when she develops an alternative personality, Cecile. Cecile indicates Mai's abjection experience on a personal level as an innocent child shaken by her sister's dying body after being shot. Her mother's emotional and physical abandonment of Mai greatly contributes to her self-division. Bão, on the other hand, appears as a fiercer voice later and is both a personification of and a rebel against her national abjection. Confrontation with the past is important to the Vietnamese, for reconciling with past choices and for recognizing the Vietnamese self that sometimes has to be suppressed in diaspora. Focusing on Vietnamese lives during the war, this chapter opened up the treatment of refugees over their so-called neediness for discussion. Furthermore, the representation of devastation caused by the war poses a counter-narrative regarding the wars made under national liberation discourses.

Things We Lost to the Water by Eric Nguyen marks the last chapter of this dissertation. Like other younger generation authors in this study, Eric Nguyen builds his fiction on his family's refugee story that is the focus of this dissertation in line with the theories offered by CRS scholars and national abjection. Unlike other novels that feature mother-daughter or daughter-father relationships, this chapter looked at mother-son dynamics in the Vietnamese diaspora. Fleeing Vietnam on a boat, Huong comes to the US with her son Tuan while being pregnant with Binh, who later identifies himself as Ben. Her husband, Cong, due to his traumatic torture experience with water in the reeducation camp, cannot get into the boat. While his decision dramatically changes the plans for their new life, Huong's constant relationship with the water, first through the ocean, later with Hurricane

Katrina, displays the dual nature of water as freedom and threat. Throughout the novel, water is an important symbol that represents their precarious relationship to America and their shifting conception of identity and belonging as national abjects.

While the theme of belonging and identity is the common thread that runs through this study, Chapter Four also offered an examination of the Vietnamese experience through a single refugee woman. Huong is abject since she stands outside the myth of ideal motherhood as a single mother, and she is a national abject due to her being a Vietnamese war refugee. Therefore, her experience in displacement presents a double struggle. While working under racial capitalism, Huong has to preserve her responsibilities toward her children in physical and emotional terms. Navigating social and economic challenges as a national abject causes emotional distress. Her anxiety reflects itself as asperity on the children and causes a rift. Single mother parenting leads to a realization of her self-neglect. Even though Vinh is not a good candidate as an unemployed refugee himself, at one point, she gives up assuming a sacrificial mother mode and lets him into her life. Yet, their relationship shows Huong's deep longing for a family that is disrupted by the war. Her conflict with her children and her children's unhappiness are also outcomes of their severed ties with Vietnam.

Tuan's involvement in a Vietnamese street gang, the Southern Boyz, is also related to the losses as a result of the Vietnam War. While he was a promising student under his teacher father's guidance back in Vietnam, Tuan's life in Louisiana contrasts with his life in Vietnam greatly. His exposure to bullying by his peers and his teachers' racist remarks over his deteriorating examination marks during the school years cause him to look for an identification through the gang. Luckily, his gentle nature prevents him from getting involved in crimes such as a violent attack on the owner of a Chinese market planned by the gang. Thus, the problem of Vietnamese gangs, which is a prevalent phenomenon in the Vietnamese experience, is examined in this context. Their attempt to ensure justice in illegal ways could be read as an outcome of the unfair treatment they cannot digest as an abject community. Thus, it poses a site for the marginalized Vietnamese youth, exemplified by Tuan. As such, Tuan's status disproves the validity of the model minority stereotype.

For Binh—or Ben, as he prefers, his family’s leaving Vietnam means a broken transmission of the past since he does not have prior knowledge as a second-generation Vietnamese. For Ben, the absence of his father signifies a big problem in his national and sexual identity formation. Passing as Ben does not resolve his internal conflicts, while stereotypical remarks by his white friends do not erase the contradictions he feels as a national abject. Ben’s separation from his mother’s home starts the process that he desires to cope with his racial identity fluctuations and explore his sexuality. Therefore, becoming autonomous does not give him the freedom from his identity as he thinks it would. Yet, Ben’s physical separation leads him to recognize his nationally abject queer Vietnamese American identity and to develop self-determination. Furthermore, Tuan’s leaving the gang and starting a new life with his partner and Huong’s overcoming her fear of water in the end provide a reconciliation with their nationally abject fluctuating identities. Huong comes to terms with her choice of starting a new life in America despite the challenges and lost opportunities if they had stayed in Vietnam.

As the novels in this dissertation demonstrate, “moving on” comes forward as a repeating theme and desire in the identity discussion of the younger generation. For the Luong daughters, Cherry, Mai, Tuan, and Ben, the possibilities of “moving on” are explored. It is intricately related to their coming to terms with or attempting to reconcile with their nationally abject Vietnamese identity. Therefore, going after the suppressed past, confrontation, and self-actualization are offered as possible ways to build resilience. Each novel features two siblings.³⁶ While one of them usually has rebellious tendencies, the other one is the responsible type. Their contrasting personalities show different responses to parental pressure, particularly regarding achievement in American society, while maintaining Vietnamese values. Apart from exemplifying the generational conflict among the Vietnamese families, these examples show the long-term consequences of social, political, and economic disadvantages caused by national abjection. The families have to act in the abject positions dictated by the forces of national abjection with an acceptance. It was their way of survival. It does not mean they were victimized, though,

³⁶ Except for *The Lotus and The Storm* where Khanh, one of the sisters is killed in an assassination targeting the Vietnamese soldier father.

since the refugee families have the agency for self-determination, marking the course of their lives. Flight from Vietnam emerges as a personal choice.

Furthermore, the concept of family and the mother-child relationships are other issues discussed in the Vietnamese refugee context. While the family can be an oppressive institution, limiting the agency of the younger generation, it is important for the younger Vietnamese to grab a sense of subjectivity. The children's responses to the demands of their mothers, sometimes negative and sometimes positive, are examined with regard to the circumstances giving way to these responses. In Eric Nguyen's novel, as different from the other three novels, the mother-son relationship is explored. Although the dynamics differ, an overbearing mother usually has a negative effect on the child, as it is seen in Cherry's intention to stay in Vietnam against her mother's wishes and Tuan's becoming a gang member. Regardless of the definitions of motherhood, it is important to consider the conditions the Vietnamese mothers threaded their relations with their children. The social, cultural, economic, and even psychological challenges these mothers have to deal with create a lasting effect on their relationship, as it is seen in Mai's case. Apart from the direct trauma of the war on her, her worsening mental disorder is partly an outcome of her PTSD mother's lack of affection. Therefore, war is not a rescue and liberation matter as presented by the American government, but rather a force that causes destruction at physical and emotional levels. It kills the promise of life at various levels, for better or worse.

Drawing on Yên Lê Espiritu's formulation of the refugee subject as a source of knowledge production, as referred to in the Introduction, this dissertation fulfilled one of the premises of critical refugee studies by reflecting on the accounts of the younger generation Vietnamese Americans. They serve as a form of knowledge from the refugee perspectives to delve into the origins and perpetuation of unjust practices and policies the Vietnamese refugees have encountered. Positioning of the Vietnamese as national abjects—or subordinate victimized subjects—corresponds to a subordination that affects their quality of life and opportunities. As Espiritu also mentions, it is important to interrogate “the established principles of the nation-state and the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it” (*Body Counts* 10). Likewise, their fictional accounts

reveal the historical and ongoing racism and display the contradictions that the nation aims to hide. Thus, the younger generation Vietnamese takes the war discussion to another level by disrupting the silence employed by their parents and the nation. They incorporate the responses of the older and younger generations as national abjects to the impacts of the war, trauma, and loss. They have endured discontinuities and dispossession on many levels. Yet, flight and resettlement were based on personal decisions, most of the time, that were made not only for their children but also for themselves. In the end, they realized that belonging is an ongoing process.



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HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞINA Tarih: 16/07/2025 Tez Başlığı : Yirmi Birinci Yüzyıl Vietnamlı Amerikalı Romanlarında Savaş ve Göç Tez Başlığı (Almanca/Fransızca)*:..... Yukarıda başlığı verilen tezin a) Kapak sayfası, b) Giriş, c) Ana bölümler ve d) Sonuç kısımlarından oluşan toplam 245 sayfalık kısmına ilişkin, 10/07/2025 tarihinde şahsım/tez danışmanım tarafından Turnitin adlı intihal tespit programından aşağıda işaretlenmiş filtrelemeler uygulanarak alınmış olan orijinallik raporuna göre, tezin benzerlik oranı % 2'dir. Uygulanan filtrelemeler**: ☒ Kabul/Onay ve Bildirim sayfaları hariç ☒ Kaynakça hariç ☒ Alıntılar hariç ☐ Alıntılar dâhil ☒ 5 kelimedenden daha az örtüşme içeren metin kısımları hariç Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tez Çalışması Orijinallik Raporu Alınması ve Kullanılması Uygulama Esasları'nı inceledim ve bu Uygulama Esasları'nda belirtilen azami benzerlik oranlarına göre tezin herhangi bir intihal içermediğini; aksinin tespit edileceği muhtemel durumlarda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim. Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim. Fatma Eren
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Öğrenci Bilgileri	Ad-Soyad	Fatma Eren		
	Öğrenci No			
	Enstitü Anabilim Dalı	Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı		
	Programı	Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı		
	Statüsü	Doktora ☒	Lisans Derecesi ile (Bütünleşik) Dr	☐

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*Tez **Almanca** veya **Fransızca** yazılıyor ise bu kısımda tez başlığı **Tez Yazım Dilinde** yazılmalıdır.

**Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tez Çalışması Orijinallik Raporu Alınması ve Kullanılması Uygulama Esasları İkinci bölüm madde (4)/3'te de belirtildiği üzere: Kaynakça hariç, Alıntılar hariç/dahil, 5 kelimedenden daha az örtüşme içeren metin kısımları hariç (Limit match size to 5 words) filtreleme yapılmalıdır.

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		Yayın Tarihi Date of Pub.	04.01.2023
	FRM-DR-21 Doktora Tezi Orijinallik Raporu <i>PhD Thesis Dissertation Originality Report</i>	Revizyon No Rev. No.	02
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TO HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE Date: 16/07/2025 Thesis Title (In English): War And Migration in Twenty-First Century Vietnamese American Novels According to the originality report obtained by myself/my thesis advisor by using the Turnitin plagiarism detection software and by applying the filtering options checked below on 10/07/2025 for the total of 245 pages including the a) Title Page, b) Introduction, c) Main Chapters, and d) Conclusion sections of my thesis entitled above, the similarity index of my thesis is 2%. Filtering options applied**: ☒ Approval and Declaration sections excluded ☒ References cited excluded ☒ Quotes excluded ☐ Quotes included ☒ Match size up to 5 words excluded I hereby declare that I have carefully read Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences Guidelines for Obtaining and Using Thesis Originality Reports that according to the maximum similarity index values specified in the Guidelines, my thesis does not include any form of plagiarism; that in any future detection of possible infringement of the regulations I accept all legal responsibility; and that all the information I have provided is correct to the best of my knowledge. I respectfully submit this for approval. Fatma Eren
--

Student Information	Name-Surname	Fatma Eren	
	Student Number		
	Department	American Culture and Literature	
	Programme	American Culture and Literature	
	Status	PhD ☒	Combined MA/MSc-PhD ☐

SUPERVISOR'S APPROVAL

APPROVED

Prof. Dr. Bergüzar Meldan Tanrısal

**As mentioned in the second part [article (4)/3] of the Thesis Dissertation Originality Report's Codes of Practice of Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences, filtering should be done as following: excluding reference, quotation excluded/included, Match size up to 5 words excluded.

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		Yayın Tarihi Date of Pub.	22.11.2023
	FRM-DR-12 Doktora Tezi Etik Kurul Muafiyeti Formu <i>Ethics Board Form for PhD Thesis</i>	Revizyon No Rev. No.	02
		Revizyon Tarihi Rev.Date	25.01.2024

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞINA Tarih: 16/07/2025 Tez Başlığı : Yirmi Birinci Yüzyıl Vietnamlı Amerikalı Romanlarında Savaş ve Göç Tez Başlığı (Almanca/Fransızca)*:..... Yukarıda başlığı verilen tez çalışmam: 1. İnsan ve hayvan üzerinde deney niteliği taşımamaktadır. 2. Biyolojik materyal (kan, idrar vb. biyolojik sıvılar ve numuneler) kullanılmasını gerektirmemektedir. 3. Beden bütünlüğüne veya ruh sağlığına müdahale içermemektedir. 4. Anket, ölçek (test), mülakat, odak grup çalışması, gözlem, deney, görüşme gibi teknikler kullanılarak katılımcılardan veri toplanmasını gerektiren nitel ya da nicel yaklaşımlarla yürütülen araştırma niteliğinde değildir. 5. Diğer kişi ve kurumlardan temin edilen veri kullanımını (kitap, belge vs.) gerektirmektedir. Ancak bu kullanım, diğer kişi ve kurumların izin verdiği ölçüde Kişisel Bilgilerin Korunması Kanuna riayet edilerek gerçekleştirilecektir. Hacettepe Üniversitesi Etik Kurullarının Yönergelerini inceledim ve bunlara göre çalışmamın yürütülebilmesi için herhangi bir Etik Kuruldan izin alınmasına gerek olmadığını; aksi durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim. Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim. Fatma Eren

Öğrenci Bilgileri	Ad-Soyad	Fatma Eren	
	Öğrenci No		
	Enstitü Anabilim Dalı	Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı	
	Programı	Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı	
	Statüsü	Doktora ☒	Lisans Derecesi ile (Bütünleşik) Dr ☐

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		Yayın Tarihi Date of Pub.	22.11.2023
	FRM-DR-12 Doktora Tezi Etik Kurul Muafiyeti Formu <i>Ethics Board Form for PhD Thesis</i>	Revizyon No Rev. No.	02
		Revizyon Tarihi Rev.Date	25.01.2024

HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES DEPARTMENT OF AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE Date: 16/07/2025 ThesisTitle (In English): War And Migration in Twenty-First Century Vietnamese American Novels My thesis work with the title given above: - Does not perform experimentation on people or animals. - Does not necessitate the use of biological material (blood, urine, biological fluids and samples, etc.). - Does not involve any interference of the body's integrity. - Is not a research conducted with qualitative or quantitative approaches that require data collection from the participants by using techniques such as survey, scale (test), interview, focus group work, observation, experiment, interview. - Requires the use of data (books, documents, etc.) obtained from other people and institutions. However, this use will be carried out in accordance with the Personal Information Protection Law to the extent permitted by other persons and institutions. I hereby declare that I reviewed the Directives of Ethics Boards of Hacettepe University and in regard to these directives it is not necessary to obtain permission from any Ethics Board in order to carry out my thesis study; I accept all legal responsibilities that may arise in any infringement of the directives and that the information I have given above is correct. I respectfully submit this for approval. Fatma Eren

Student Information	Name-Surname	Fatma Eren	
	Student Number		
	Department	American Culture and Literature	
	Programme	American Culture and Literature	
	Status	PhD ☒	Combined MA/MSc-PhD ☐

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