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The pursuit of happiness in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Povzetek

V nalogi postavimo raziskovalno vprašanje *How do the novel's main characters' decisions reflect their pursuit of happiness in Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous?* Preiskujemo vodila za odločitve v romanu *Bežen trenutek bajnosti* ameriško-vietnamskega avtorja Oceana Vuonga. Napisan je v obliki pisma, ki ga pripovedovalec piše mami, ki ne zna angleško in ga nikoli ne bo prebrala. V nalogi raziskujemo, kako so te odločitve povezane z iskanjem sreče pri treh generacijah: Lan (babica), Rose (mama) in Little Dogu (pripovedovalec). Raziskujemo tudi, v kakšni meri so te odločitve zavestne in ali se med generacijami razlikuje, v kolikšni meri so preživetvenega pomena. Potrebni so različni pristopi za analizo odločitev likov – o enem je pisano v prvi, o drugem v drugi in o tretjem v tretji osebi. Osredotočimo se na to, da so med tremi generacijami razlike v tem, v kolikšni meri so odločitve sprejete zavestno, in tudi o razlikah v odločitvah, ki lahko vplivajo na preživetje likov.

Ključne besede:

roman, pismo, Vietnam, vietnamska vojna, sreča, motivacija, družinski odnosi, mama, sin, babica

Abstract

This research paper answers the research question *How do the novel's main characters' decisions reflect their pursuit of happiness in Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous?* We analyse the motivations behind the characters' decisions in the novel of this Vietnamese-American author. It is written in the epistolary mode as a letter from the narrator to his mother who does not know English. We research how the decisions are connected with the pursuit of happiness in three generations of immigrants: Lan (grandmother), Rose (mother) and Little Dog (narrator). We try to establish to what extent the decisions are conscious and of existential significance for the characters. We use

different approaches with the characters' decisions as one is written about in first, the second in second and the third in third person. We focus on the differences regarding how consciously the decisions are made and to what extent they are of existential importance for the characters.

Keywords:

novel, epistolary novel, Vietnam, letter, happiness, decisions, familial relations, mother, son, grandmother

Razširjeni povzetek

V raziskovalni nalogi raziskujemo vodila za odločitve v romanu *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (*Bežen trenutek bajnosti*) ameriško-vietnamskega avtorja Oceana Vuonga.

V nalogi postavimo raziskovalno vprašanje *How do the novel's main characters' decisions reflect their pursuit of happiness in Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous?* Roman je napisan v obliki pisma, ki ga pripovedovalec piše mami, ki ne zna angleško in ga nikoli ne bo prebrala. Predvsem preiskujemo vodila za odločitve v romanu *Bežen trenutek bajnosti* ameriško-vietnamskega avtorja Oceana Vuonga. V romanu so vključeni motivi vojne, mame samohranilke, demence itd. Vse to vključimo v analizo iskanja sreče pri treh generacijah priseljencev: Lan (babica), Rose (mama) in Little Dogu (pripovedovalec).

Zanima nas, v kakšni meri so odločitve, povezane z iskanjem sreče, zavestne pri predstavniku vsake generacije. Postavimo hipotezo, ki predvideva, da bodo odločitve vsake naslednje generacije manj zavestne. Ugotovimo, da so pri pripovedovalčevi babici odločitve večinoma zavestne, saj gre za odločitve življenjskega pomena, kot so pobeg iz nasilnega zakona, delo prostitutke in selitev v Združene države Amerike. Mamine odločitve večinoma niso zavestne, saj gre za odločitve o njihovi družbeni identiteti. Njena najbolj zavestna odločitev je vzgajanje Little Doga kot nekoga, ki se zna braniti, in pomirja jo to, da bo on imel lepše življenje. Odločitve pripovedovalca Little Doga so bolj zavestne, saj je zelo reflektivna oseba in v fiktivnem pogovoru z mamo kot prejemnico pisma opisuje svoje motive in razlaga o svojih krizah. Tako hipotezo zavržemo, saj so odločitve Rose res manj zavestne kot odločitve Lan, vendar so odločitve Little Doga bolj zavestne kot odločitve Rose.

Ugotavljamo tudi, ali se med generacijami razlikuje, v kakšni meri so odločitve, povezane z iskanjem sreče, preživetvenega pomena. Postavimo hipotezo, ki predvideva, da bodo odločitve vsake naslednje generacije manj življenjsko pomembne. Ugotovimo, da gre pri babici za že zgoraj opisane odločitve, ki so ključnega pomena za preživetje. Mama se bolj ukvarja z identiteto družine v družbi in delno tudi preživetjem, a le, kar se tiče denarja. Little Dog se ne ukvarja z zelo življenjsko pomembnimi vprašanji, ampak z odkrivanjem samega

sebe in zbližanjem z mamo. Hipotezo potrdimo, saj so res odločitve vsake naslednje generacije bolj življenjskega pomena kot odločitve prejšnje.

Postavimo hipotezo, ki predvideva, da so potrebni različni pristopi za analiziranje odločitev likov. Little Dog je pripovedovalec in tako o sebi piše v prvi osebi, zaradi česar imamo največ dostopa do njegovega razmišljanja in vodil. Je tudi zelo reflektivna oseba, ki pogosto svoje motive omeni celo sama. O mami piše v drugi osebi in tako njo kot njene odločitve opisuje na intimen način. O babici Little Dog piše v tretji osebi in so tako njena vodila nejasna, predvsem zato, ker v romanu ni veliko pogovorov z njo, saj v starosti že resno trpi za demenco in shizofrenijo. Hipotezo potrdimo. Little Dogove odločitve so bolj jasne, saj je celotno besedilo samorefleksivno in je samo po sebi analitično. Mamine odločitve tudi sam analizira na bolj intimen način – v fiktivnem pogovoru z njo. Tako nam je lažje razumeti njena vodila, vendar je potrebno, da smo pozorni, saj tudi on ni vseveden. O babičinih vodilih Little Dog niti sam ne razmišlja toliko in nam je tako potrebno previdno in globlje razmišljati o povodih za njene odločitve.

Zahvala

Zahvaljujem se predvsem mentorju za podporo in veliko dodatnega časa za svetovanje. Zahvaljujem se tudi družini in vsem drugim, ki so mi vedno stali ob strani in razumeli moje pomanjkanje časa zanje.

1 Introduction

Promises of happiness and hopes for a better life are the main incentives for migration from war-affected countries. First generation immigrants often exhaust themselves in doing everything possible to provide a better life for future generations in the first place, and for themselves in the second. As is often the case, the main characters in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* sacrifice a lot and make difficult choices that help them meet their goals in their pursuit of happiness. This, then, often results in endless dissatisfaction and a never-ending longing for a better life. We wanted to research the motivations leading to decisions made in pursuit of happiness in three generations: grandmother, mother and son. We wanted to see how experiences differ across different generations of immigrants. The novel also includes themes of homosexuality, racism and other sensitive topics and we wanted to see how the main characters deal with them and still make decisions that lead to a happier and more fulfilling life.

1.1 Research question

Our research question for this research paper is: *How do the novel's main characters' decisions reflect their pursuit of happiness in Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous?*

1.2 Hypotheses

H_1 : *The motivation behind decisions becomes less conscious with every generation.*

If we classify the motivations behind the decisions of each character into conscious and not conscious, we expect to find that they become less conscious with every next generation. This is because the first generation immigrants, the grandmother, had to make very important decisions that concerned the whole family while the mother and Little Dog were more concerned with survival.

H₂: Each generation's decisions become less existential.

We expect to find that each generation's decisions are less existentially vital as each generation lives in objectively better conditions.

H₃: The generations' decisions are evident in different ways.

Since Little Dog is the narrator of the novel, which is a letter to his mother, directly addressing her in the 2nd person and describing his grandmother in the third person, we expect to find that the motives behind their decisions will be evident differently.

2 Methodology

2.1 Analysis of the primary source

Firstly, we read the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and discussed the themes that stood out the most. We quickly decided that the pursuit of happiness and differences among different generations of immigrants are the themes that may not be the most conspicuous but are still present throughout the novel. This theme is under-researched as most of the research thus far focuses only on the narrator, Little Dog. For example, Christina Slopek researched gender roles and queerness (Slopek, C., 2021) in the novel and Naiara López Alcázar researched Little Dog's trauma and border-crossing identity (López Alcázar, N., 2022).

Because our research question is centred around such introspective processes, decision-making and the pursuit of happiness, we had to thoroughly decide on how to analyse the novel. It is important to be aware that subjectivity is present, especially when needing such different approaches to analyse the three characters. This was especially present in the analysis of Lan, Little Dog's grandmother, as she did not discuss her decisions and motivations with Little Dog and it was also difficult to judge them through his perspective. With this example, it was important to understand that there might be psychological and sociological factors that are at fault for his lack of analysis of his grandmother even in comparison to his mother, such as not daring to analyse or doubt authority as a prime example of Vietnamese familial relations. It was therefore necessary to read between the lines and use different approaches to analysing Lan's decisions, not just through what is directly stated by Little Dog. This was important overall – to avoid difficulties that arise with introspection and subjectivity in Little Dog's descriptions of his motivations and his subjective and emotionally-connected description of Rose's motivations.

2.2 Analysis of the secondary sources

We researched several secondary sources that make up the theoretical background of this research paper and are related to the research question. Being familiar with the theoretical background is of crucial importance when dealing with such a novel as there are many

important cultural references and the understanding of the novel would not be complete without also knowing about the War in Vietnam and the American involvement in it, as well as the familial relations in Vietnamese culture.

2.2.1 Theoretical background

2.2.1.1 About the author

Ocean Vuong was born on October 14th 1988 in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in Vietnam. He was then raised in Hartford, Connecticut in a working class family of nail salon and factory workers. He attended Manchester Community College and then transferred to Pace University to study International Marketing. Later, he enrolled at Brooklyn College, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Nineteenth Century American Literature. He currently works as a professor in Modern Poetry and Poetics in the MFA program at NYU (About, 2023).

Besides the novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Vuong also writes poems. His poetry collection *Time is a Mother* was a The New York Times bestselling poetry collection. He is also a recipient of a 2019 MacArthur "Genius" Grant, the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Whiting Award, the Thom Gunn Award and more. Vuong's writing has been featured in *The Atlantic*, *Granta*, *Harpers*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *The New Yorker* etc (About, 2023). His novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is partly fiction and partly memoir as the writer's grandparents were also a Vietnamese woman and a US soldier. Just like the protagonist, the author moved to the US with his mother and grandmother (Armitstead, 2017).

2.2.1.2 On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

The novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong takes the form of an epistolary novel as it is based on a letter. The whole novel is only one letter written by Little Dog to his mother, Rose, as he knows she would never be able to read it due to poor English. The events in the novel are not in a chronological order, but certain views and perspectives are presented more at each point in the novel. Most of the novel is set in the 1990s and Little Dog is 28 years old at the time of writing the letter.

2.2.1.3 The Vietnam War

The war in Vietnam, lasting from 1954 to 1975, was a protracted conflict between the communist government of North Vietnam against the government in South Vietnam. The war is also referred to as “the American War” in Vietnam as the main ally of the government was the United States. The conflict quickly turned into a fight of the United States against Vietnamese communists. This accentuates that, in reality, the conflict was a manifestation of the Cold War – the Soviets (Communists) fighting against the United States (Spector, 2024).

According to many historians, the South Asian conflicts in general had its roots in the French colonial period of the 1800s. The conflicts involved many countries, mostly The United States, France, China, the Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Laos. French rule started in 1887, when the French imposed a colonial system over Vietnam, calling it French Indochina and tensions started to rise. The conflict escalated when Ho Chi Minh, a Soviet-trained agent of the Comintern¹, founded the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930. After many different takeovers during the Second World War, such as those by Nazi Germany and Japan, Japanese troops declared Vietnam independent. However, as Japan was defeated in the war, France began asserting its power in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh, as leader of the communist party, rejected a French proposal of limited self-governing and began a guerilla war against the French. After many conflicts in the following years, the US started the war by president Dwight D. Eisenhower issuing a statement that French Indochina falling under communist rule could create a *domino effect* in Southeast Asia (History.com editors, 2023).

The war started coming to an end in January 1973 by the US and North Vietnam signing a peace agreement. It finally ended in April the same year when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) captured Saigon and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City. The Vietnamese war killed approximately 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong² fighters, up to 250000 South Vietnamese soldiers, 58220 Americans and more than 2 million civilians on both sides. The end of the war resulted in the reunification of Vietnam (History.com editors, 2023).

¹ The Communist International

² the military branch of the National Liberation Front; the army of South Vietnam

2.2.1.4 American soldiers in Vietnam

Due to the American influence in the Vietnam War, the war is often also called *the American war*. During the involvement, 2594000 military personnel served in Vietnam (Barden & Provo, 1995). The US stepped in when the French were defeated by Vietnamese revolutionaries and waged a counterrevolutionary war. They also tried to pressure many other nations, most notably Australia and South Korea, to send military forces (Appy, 2018). American soldiers lived and served with South Vietnamese troops and became part of them. The official American position was actively against communists in Vietnam and while many soldiers volunteered to fight, others did not know what to expect when they were forced to go to Vietnam. The war divided the American public severely by the end. It took the lives of 58220 US personnel and hundreds of thousands more came home with serious injuries and had trouble reintegrating into society due to severe PTSD³, substance abuse and more (Jones, 2023).

Americans are still very proud of their contribution in the War in Vietnam. In 2017, National Vietnam War Veterans Recognition Day Act was passed and March 29 set as a day to recognize the service of Vietnam veterans (Jones, 2023).

The novel is connected with American soldiers as Lan and her husband met in Saigon when she was a prostitute and he was an American soldier. She liked him because he was the only American soldier who did not treat her as an object. Rose's father is also an American soldier, however, he is unknown and the reader can assume that he was one of Lan's clients.

2.2.1.5 Vietnamese immigration to the United States

The end of the Vietnam War 1975 was the beginning of a large-scale migration from Vietnam to the US and that year, the American government helped evacuate about 125000 Vietnamese that were endangered by the new Communist government. The number of immigrants from Vietnam to the US grew rapidly even after this. Nowadays, the Vietnamese are the sixth largest nationality group of immigrants in the United States and 87% of new Vietnamese lawful permanent residents obtain their status through family reunification. Especially first and second generation immigrants are also more likely to have lower levels of

³ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

education and have poorer knowledge of English. However, they report higher median household incomes than other immigrants and even the US-born population (Batalova, 2023).

Vietnamese immigration to the United States is a very relevant theme in the novel, especially since the characters' main motive for immigration was to escape war – the main reason for Vietnamese immigration to the United States.

2.2.1.6 Familial relations in Vietnamese culture

Family is a very important aspect of life in Vietnam and Vietnamese families are much more tight-knit than in many Western countries. Often, extended family members are more connected with each other and provide a central support system. Three generations usually live under the same roof. In Vietnam, belonging to a family is of crucial importance – this means also being connected with your ancestors and the future generations of the family. Vietnamese families have a significant, obediently followed hierarchy with a patriarch – usually the oldest man in the family. Traditionally, the Vietnamese parenting style is mostly authoritarian and children are expected to follow all rules and share the views of their parents (Cultural Atlas Editors, 2016). Parenting is an important cultural aspect when looking at different generations. As we are researching the pursuit of happiness in the novel, we might find that in authoritarian parenting, values are often shared with the child and their value system might then be either similar or completely different out of rebellion. When looking at such an introspective and personal element as motives, we have to keep in mind that values of one generation are never completely independent from those of the previous generations.

Family changes occur in Vietnamese families upon immigration as they often shift from extended to nuclear family systems and spousal couples decide together, no longer having the duty to seek consent from parental families in the home land. Traditional Vietnamese families are generally not accepting of homosexual family members and often, such individuals keep their identity hidden. As in many East-Asian cultures, the Vietnamese put a strong emphasis on education. Whenever a family member is ill, it is the women's job to take care of the patient (Galanti, 2000). This is interesting when looking at the novel On

Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous from a Western perspective – one might often wonder why Lan is being taken care of by her daughter and grandson instead of being in eldercare as would be more usual in western cultures. We then find out that it is partly because in Vietnamese culture, being taken care of by their family is something each individual expects as it is part of their upbringing.

2.2.1.7 What is happiness?

Most concretely, happiness can be defined as the feeling we get when hormones dopamine and serotonin are released. They are chemical messengers – neurotransmitters – that help regulate many bodily functions and are often also called the “happy hormones” (Felman, 2024). When the body is presented with the right amount of dopamine, we feel happy, content, motivated and relaxed. The human brain is wired to behave in ways that assure a release of dopamine. These ways might be surprising and on first hand do not look like behaviours in search of happiness. Dopamine is also released in feelings of comfort and safety (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

It is important to agree on a definition of happiness because otherwise, we could understand the character's decisions in the novel differently. We are analysing happiness as the described unconscious search and this might many times not look like actual happiness, for example in instances where a mother gives up something but the action of giving up something brings her happiness, similarly when happiness originates from knowing that her child had a better future ahead. This Eleanor Roosevelt's quote describes the psychological aspect of happiness we are referring to in this research paper: "*Happiness is not a goal; it is a by-product*".

3 Analysis

3.1 Lan

Little Dog's grandmother's decisions are significant to the family's move firstly to Saigon and then to the United States, especially her first move without Little Dog and his mother.

Lan is always talked about in the third person, whether it is when Little Dog is describing her or when he and his mother are conversing. The motives behind her decisions are more difficult to understand as she never discusses them nor is the reader present in many direct conversations between grandmother and grandson.

3.1.1 Decision to escape an arranged marriage and work as a prostitute

After leaving her home town and husband from her arranged marriage, Lan moves to Saigon. She runs away with her daughter, Mai, Little Dog's aunt. In order to support herself and her daughter, she rents a room by the river where she works as a prostitute and accepts customers, American soldiers, while Mai is left in the care of her aunt. The fact that Lan is still embarrassed of this decades later, which is seen when she tells Little Dog not to tell this to his mom, shows how her work as a prostitute was a sacrifice to secure a better life for them both, ultimately trying to achieve a semblance of happiness. After finding herself in a burdensome position, she took a job that she found shameful, thus putting in immense effort and showing strong will to create a better life for herself and her daughter by moving away from an arranged and unsatisfactory marriage, as well as from a small, war-torn town. This shows her immense dedication powered by her pursuit of happiness. The latter also serves as a stimulus to eventually move to another country. She believes that moving to the US is worth feeling ashamed of herself, as it means financially supporting her family, which is of existential importance.

In order to support herself and her daughter after running away, she becomes a prostitute. Her looks help her – in order to be a sex worker, it is beneficial to be physically attractive. It is mentioned several times that Lan's looks helped her immensely in her survival. Adult Little Dog reveals that his grandmother told him how it was her body that kept her alive. She also talks about her purple dress which is of great importance to her because she wore it when she met the American soldier who later turns out to be Paul, her future husband. Because of all this, it is paramount for Lan to preserve her attractive looks. Thus, for example, she makes Little Dog regularly pluck her grey hair. This, then, is neither an act of vanity nor a desperate measure to retain youthful looks, but should be seen as Lan's means of survival, something that has helped her throughout her life. In exchange, she also tells him stories about how it was her body and the purple dress that kept her alive. She talks about how by plucking her

grey hair, Little Dog gets the “snow off her life” (Vuong, 2020, p. 23) and keeps her young. It is of great significance for her to preserve the one thing that kept her alive and brought her to the current point in life. Her need to keep her looks intact seems to be subconscious and superstitious. She feels that since her good looks brought her money and material goods she needed to survive, she must preserve the good looks to keep them.

This underlines her search for happiness and comfort because by controlling her looks, she feels that she is in control of her future and destiny. This is mostly not conscious as it is just a superstition. However, after some time a conscious decision as she tells Little Dog that by plucking her hair, he gets the “snow off her life” (Vuong, 2020, p. 23) and this is why she asks him to do it repeatedly.

3.1.2 Decision to rename

One of Lan’s first steps in search of happiness is choosing a new, different name for herself. From her birth until that point, she was nameless because her mother had only ever called her Seven. The reason for that is that she and her siblings were named after the order in which they were born, indicating their mother had no particular emotional connection with the names of her children, which shows lack of care and love. After running away from her arranged marriage, Lan therefore names herself Lan, meaning *orchid*, “a flower that opens like something torn apart” (Vuong, 2020, p. 41), symbolising both her beauty and fragility. Something being torn apart but still opening symbolises the substantial changes in Lan’s life after putting herself in such uncertain and dangerous situations – running away, firstly from her arranged marriage and, then, even fleeing the country she has called home her whole life. This decision to rename herself indicates her perseverance in taking action to better her life and is the start of her search for happiness. Considering one’s name is an integral part of one’s identity, assigning oneself a new name suggests a new beginning and start of a, hopefully, happier life.

Further, Lan naming herself after a flower signifies the start of choosing names with meaningful symbolism that she thinks can help in life. Thus, for example, when she gives birth to the protagonist’s mother, she names her Hong, meaning “rose”. Lan’s first daughter, born in her arranged marriage, is named Mai, meaning “yellow apricot blossom”. Both roses

and yellow apricot blossoms are lucky flowers in Vietnamese culture and are often connected with the Lunar New Year, believed to bring good things in the new year. Roses are also a symbol of love (Colliot, 2023). This symbolises new beginnings and longing for happiness, which is an important driving force in Lan's life. Little Dog is also a nickname that Lan gives the novel's protagonist. She chooses this name because dogs are seen as despicable creatures in Vietnam and in the village where Lan grew up, the smallest and weakest children are named after the most hideous and worthless things in the hopes that evil spirits will leave them untouched and thus shield them. Lan naming herself using symbolic imagery as well as her choice of meaningful names for her children are significant stepping stones in her search for happiness.

This decision is both conscious and not because part of it is only superstition and feeling safe and comfortable due to a new name. However, it is also conscious, as it is described how Lan says she chose names due to their symbolic meanings when deciding to create a new life for herself. In order to create a new life, she also had to consciously change her opinion and outlook.

3.2 Rose

Little Dog's mother's decisions have a significant impact on the family's life in the United States. They are also most important because with Lan being sick with Alzheimer's disease, Rose is left responsible for both her son and her mother. She is left with deciding the family's position in American society.

Rose is addressed in the second person as she is the person Little Dog is writing his letter to. However, we never read her responses and her experience as Little Dog is more talking to an idea of her than expecting a response.

3.2.1 Decision to be subservient

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the reader senses the immense feeling of subservience experienced by both women in the protagonist's family. On the one hand, this is a feeling of being inferior to Americans due to constantly being treated only as immigrants. For Little

Dog's mother, this feeling, on the one hand, stems from her work in a nail salon. Her job is to serve others and, thus, be subservient, offering Americans her services, which leads to feelings of inferiority in her everyday life as well. On the other hand, being subservient is also a conscious choice Rose makes in order to avoid conflict and to please the customers in the nail salon, which results in being paid better and receiving higher tips. Thus, for example, Little Dog as an adult narrator remembers and underscores the fact that nail salon workers say "sorry" excessively, both when necessary and when not. As indicated by Little Dog as the adult narrator, a simple word, *sorry*, thus suggests "I'm here, right here, beneath you," (Vuong, 2020, p. 91), hinting at the inferior social position the women in the nail salon, including his mother, assume when serving American customers. Also, this apologetic behaviour shows that workers in nail salons willingly and consciously make themselves inferior to their customers to be paid better, showing what Rose will do in exchange for something that is necessary – money, and, by extension, happiness. Also, the author portrays complete subservience by employing irony when describing how Rose's nail polish is "chipped from a week of giving pedicures" (Vuong, 2020, p. 7). The irony in this statement arises from the fact that Little Dog's mother always puts others' needs before her own, thus being submissive, taking care of other people's nails daily but not her own.

Subservience is a very important element of Rose's search for happiness and is necessary in many ways. Firstly, it is necessary to even move to the US, a country that was characterised by racism and mistreatment of immigrants at the time of her immigration. Vuong writes that *sorry* was "a passport to remain" in the US (Vuong, 2020, p. 93), indicating that immigrants felt that subservience and willingness to take on any work was a tool to avoid possible conflict and secure their lives in the new country. The author illustrates this by providing an example from Little Dog's work in a tobacco factory, where workers constantly say *lo siento*, meaning *I'm sorry*. He says that this way, they "apologise [themselves] back to making [their] living" (Vuong, 2020, p. 92). In this, comparing his mother and her coworkers in the nail salon to his mostly Hispanic coworkers in the tobacco factory, the author suggests that such an apologetic attitude is a typical trait of all immigrants in the US.

Thus, subservience is a salient aspect of Rose's quest for happiness as it is something that was necessary for her to move to the US and make enough money to support her family. In a

way, she sacrifices herself but is then comforted when it results in a better life for her son, which is also an important part of her happiness – to feel optimistic and to know that life will be better for future generations.

3.2.2 Decisions in raising Little Dog and identifying as an American

A ubiquitous theme in the novel and usually presented satirically is being happy about living in the US. Little Dog writes almost jocularly about his mother and grandmother feeling obliged to be happy just to live in the US, which is simultaneously also the source of their dissatisfaction. The jocular tone accentuates how immigrants are often almost manipulated into feeling content in their new home country, regardless of the circumstances and living conditions. The first evident example of Lan joking about it is when he writes ““I’m happy!” Lan threw her arms in the air. “I’m happy on my boat. My boat, see?” She pointed to your arms, splayed out like oars, she and I on each side. I looked down and saw it, the brown, yellowish floorboards swirling into muddy currents” (Vuong, 2020, p. 34). Here, the author uses a boat as a symbol for something that helps them sail down the river that is America. With this symbol, he underscores the family’s naivety for believing in the good American life and not complaining about their living conditions – while they do occupy a boat, they are floating into “muddy currents”. Even though their living standards fall short of what one would typically consider the American Dream come true, the family is still content with what they have. Several times, the author paints the family’s plight. This is, for example, when Lan describes her Vietnamese food as “peasant food” (Vuong, 2020, p. 18), which clearly shows how Lan has accepted their position of social inferiority. This reference to food tells the reader that if she considers Vietnamese national food as “peasant food”, then she must see her family as peasants as well. This even adds to the reader’s understanding of Lan’s acceptance of their inferiority. This acceptance brings Lan peace and calm. She feels that they are peasants and that they should be happy with the few things they have. This acceptance is not conscious, but a coping mechanism connected with her search for happiness. By accepting her family’s social inferiority, she believes that they deserve less and is happy for merely living in the US.

Connected to subservience, the reader can see Rose’s different look on Little Dog. It is important to note that Rose’s subservience is something she felt – just like other

first-generation immigrants, such as Little Dog's coworkers in the tobacco factory – was necessary for her, but not something she wanted for her son. This can be sensed when Rose is upset with Little Dog for letting himself be bullied by his American classmates for not speaking English, even though he could but was too scared to at that moment. Rose's response to this was "You have to find a way, Little Dog /.../ You have to because I don't have the English to stop them" (Vuong, 2020, p. 26), which shows she wants Little Dog not to feel inferior to his classmates and not to let them bully him for his ethnicity. For herself, she wants a life with as little conflict as possible, which she can achieve by working hard and aiming only to survive, while for her son she wishes a life based on social equality and mutual respect. Feeling respected and preserving one's integrity is also an important aspect of happiness and contentedness, which is what she wants to ensure for Little Dog by telling him to stand up for himself. The reader can assume that an important reason for her immigration to the US is to provide a better life for the future generations in her family.

While she is sacrificing herself by doing all of the above, she is comforted by assuring her son has a better life, which is a conscious choice she makes in her search for happiness. Her belief that Little Dog is more American than her adds to her happiness. Further, she feels that he has more right to be happy and preserve his integrity, and to not be made fun of, than her. Her decisions in raising Little Dog are mostly conscious as she describes wanting Little Dog to have a better life by being more American, but there is also a less conscious element to them in that she feels that it is only Little Dog that deserves to be and act American, not her.

3.2.3 Decision to turn Christian

Introducing Christianity into her life is initially not one of Rose's efforts to achieve happiness. It starts with her accepting to go to service with Little Dog's friend's family, who are Latin Americans, and attend service at a Baptist church. The family is pious and attends Sunday mass, with Little Dog even occasionally accompanying them. One day, his friend's mother invites Rose to join them and, out of politeness, she accepts. But soon, Rose and Little Dog find that at church, their ethnic heritage is insignificant to other church members, as the two are "received with warm smiles" and many people welcome them to their "father's house", even though they are the "only yellow faces in the church" (Vuong, 2020, p. 58). This is a

welcome surprise for Little Dog and Rose, who are used to always being treated as inferior, second-class citizens. Soon, Rose's mass attendance stops being an act of politeness and becomes an act of seeking comfort, acceptance and companionship. On the one hand, her belief in a higher power becomes a source of comfort, representing part of her search for happiness. When doing chores at home, she starts listening to, dancing and humming to gospel songs. Here, the narrator provides a different image of Rose. Before, she rarely enjoyed herself, but now, she becomes more alive: more energetic and active. She starts expressing emotions more explicitly, firstly by dancing and singing, and later by even expressively yelling in the church. She tears up and yells, in her mind asking her father: "Where the hell are you? Come get me! Get me out of here! Come back and get me" (Vuong, 2020, p. 59). This is the first time the reader sees her expressing her pent-up frustration with her father. The reader knows that he is an American soldier whom Rose has never met. As described by adult narrator Little Dog, inside that song, Rose has permission to lose herself and "not be wrong". With others also shouting out different emotions, one can understand this is the first time Rose feels she can express her frustrations without being frowned upon, even though all other times, she – just like many other immigrants described in the novel – has learnt to be quiet and behave in accordance with societal rules. At the church, she feels permitted by others to show emotions. This is a very striking difference from her everyday life, where she feels the need to suppress emotions and follow social norms. She conforms to make her life easier and to avoid possible conflict. She does everything to enable a calm life by often suppressing emotions. However, this changes in the church where she now experiences an emotional relief and feels like she belongs to a community. With this, the author might also try to show how she is gradually becoming more Western-like, as in Vietnamese culture emotions are typically hidden and yelling is frowned upon.

All of the above shows her search for happiness and comfort because she feels understood in a religious community. Such comfort and sense of community are important subconscious factors of Rose's search for happiness. This, then, becomes an important outlet for her to express repressed emotions, seek comfort and, ultimately, find happiness in a foreign country.

3.2.4 Decisions with adverse health consequences

Often, Rose is described to have severe back problems due to physically exhausting work at the nail salon. At one point even, she cannot sleep in bed because it is too soft to hold her joints in place. This is because her work at the nail salon has left her back strained. To remedy this, she must sleep on folded blankets on the floor. This is a symbol of her subservience and inferiority, stemming from her decision to stay in such a physically punishing job. Being on the floor can even be understood as a form of degradation, representing how she works in poor conditions and endures severe physical pain on a daily basis in order to earn money to support herself and her family.

What is not a direct health consequence but nevertheless shows how Rose dismisses her and her son's health is when Little Dog says, "But our noses soon adjust, like they always do" (Vuong, 2020, p. 81). Here, he is talking about his nose stinging due to acetone from manicures. This shows that salon work is dangerous, especially when one considers this quote together with Little Dog mentioning his cousin getting asthma a few years later due to the fumes entering the still-developing lungs of a child: "We will do this for decades – until our lungs can no longer breathe without swelling, our livers hardening with chemicals – our joints brittle and inflamed from arthritis" (Vuong, 2020, p. 80). He goes on to say that working in a salon is never immigrants' dream of a permanent job and that they all come in with a plan to get another job soon, especially due to poor salaries, no health care, and no contracts. But what can be understood from his explanations is that this salon is to be understood as a sort of a Vietnamese enclave in the US, a "place where folklore, rumors, tall tales, and jokes from the old country are told" (Vuong, 2020, p. 80), and a place filled with the scent of pho, a traditional Vietnamese food. The decision to keep working in such a place, despite health risks, detrimental health consequences, and different initial plans, shows Rose's longing for home and community that understands her and where all the working first-generation immigrants raise their children into Vietnamese-speaking adults who do not know any English before enrolling in school. All of this can certainly be interpreted as a decision, in some ways even a sacrifice, made by Little Dog's mother in pursuit of happiness – to feel safe and understood in a home-like community in a completely different country. This is similar to how she feels in church. The church offers her a

comfortable space without judgement while the nail salon is a Vietnamese cultural enclave in the midst of the US where she feels at home. Both thus, at least subconsciously, represent Rose's pursuit of happiness.

3.3 Little Dog

"On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous is more about processing and articulating difficult memories than about direct communication. Grappling with the limits of language, he is "trying to break free" by writing" (McAlpin, 2019).

Little Dog's decisions are different from his mother's and grandmother's as he grew up in the United States and are more related to him finding himself and his identity and less about having dependents to care for.

Little Dog is the narrator of the novel and therefore, the reader finds out everything from his perspective and in first person. He has a very reflective character and is self-aware. Thus, the reader can both sense the motives behind his decisions and also read about them from Little Dog himself.

3.3.1 Decisions in Little Dog's relationship with Trevor

In Little Dog's more than five year long relationship with Trevor, we can sense many patterns that show Little Dog's search for happiness. They begin a relationship the summer when Little Dog is 15 years old while Trevor is two years his senior. Trevor is a sensitive white teenager who is also struggling in coming to terms with his homosexuality and his relationship with his father.

3.3.1.1 Feeling better about himself

The relationship helps Little Dog see his own beauty and worth: "I remember it all because how can you forget anything about the day you first found yourself beautiful?" (Vuong, 2020, pg. 107). As is common in East-Asian familial relations, parents show their love through concern, not through affection (Xu, 2016). Thus, Little Dog expresses significant longing for and lack of attention in his life. Therefore, he is prepared to be in a relationship

that is as unhealthy as his with Trevor only to be shown affection. Little Dog points out how good he feels that someone desires his body. While with Trevor, he describes feeling beautiful for the first time in his life: “I let the mirror hold those flaws – because for once, drying, they were not wrong to me but something that was wanted,” (Vuong, 2020, p. 107). Feeling this kind of affection is so important to him that he also sacrifices a lot as the relationship is not healthy. It is evident even at the beginning that there is a clear hierarchy in their relationship when Little Dog says “I’m with you, Trevor”, to which Trevor responds with “Don’t call me that. It’s Trevor. Full and long, alright?” (Vuong, 2020, p. 104). The hierarchy can also be sensed when the author includes several explicit sex scenes between Trevor and Little Dog in which the true dynamics between the two is portrayed, with Little Dog accepting a submissive role and accepting Trevor’s violence. Trevor is a very masculine character and in order to have sex with Little Dog, he forces him to be in the role of the woman. “By then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love. /.../ It felt good to name what was already happening to me all my life. I was being fucked up, at last, by choice” (Vuong, 2020, 119). This extract shows how, in a way, Little Dog does not mind the violence, something he has been dealing with his whole life, if it means feeling in control and being the object of what he feels is affection. Violence is not to be understood as much literally as figuratively. Little Dog has felt unworthy and *violated* most of his life, firstly due to being mistreated by his schoolmates and other bullies, as well as feeling strange due to his cultural differences when compared to his peers. As he has gotten used to the feeling of being unworthy, consequently, started being submissive in all relationships, he feels at home with Trevor and thus accepts all the mistreatment in exchange for affection. In this relationship, he also starts feeling more in control: “nothing could be taken from me, I thought, if I had already given it away,” (Vuong, 2020, p. 201), referring to submitting himself sexually to Trevor. By saying this, we can see patterns of submissions in order to avoid conflict also seen in the relationship with his mother.

Therefore, Little Dog deciding to stay in his relationship with Trevor despite it being unhealthy shows that he feels much better about himself due to the relationship and wishes to preserve it. This is a decision made in pursuit of happiness that is mostly conscious. Little Dog analyses his own motives for being in this relationship as well, which is portrayed in the quotes mentioned below. Often, he mentions that he knows he is submitting himself to

Trevor and that this is not a positive thing, but at the same time, he comments how he longs for attention and affection that he gets from Trevor and this, in his eyes, justifies it.

3.3.1.2 Developing his identity

In his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog also starts to develop his own identity as a gay Vietnamese-American. Two years after starting his relationship with Trevor, he tells his mom about his homosexuality and even talks about having danced in the tobacco barn where he worked while wearing his mother's dress. During the relationship, Little Dog's attitude towards himself being gay changes significantly.

Firstly, Little Dog starts thinking that he is gay when he meets Trevor while working at the tobacco barn. He is slow to accept his identity and is met with derogatory words such as *little bitch*, and having the word *FAG4LIFE* printed across the family's front door. Then, as his relationship with Trevor progresses and even becomes sexual, Little Dog starts accepting his homosexuality. This is evident when talking about a college professor who stated that all gay men are inherently narcissist. When thinking about this, he writes: "But if so – why not? Maybe we look into mirrors not merely to seek beauty, regardless how illusive, but to make sure, despite the facts, that we are still here" (Vuong, 2020, p. 138). He then writes about an Albanian school friend from primary school, Gramoz, and starts noticing patterns showing homosexuality in his childhood. That when he followed Gramoz around, it "might have been because he was a boy and therefore a mirror of [himself]" (Vuong, 2020, p. 138). This statement shows how Little Dog becomes more self-aware and has a developed identity, especially in his relationship with Trevor.

The decision for Little Dog to allow himself to be openly homosexual is both conscious and not. He consciously thinks about homosexuality and starts rationalising it even though in theory and from being raised in a conservative household, he would also have grounds to rationalise it in a different direction – to reject and hide it. However, the reader senses that the acceptance did not come only from rationality but also from his relationship with Trevor. Before the relationship, Little Dog had not even thought about his homosexual identity and even suppressed it, but in his relationship, this identity starts becoming more present and eventually, he even accepts it, which is not conscious.

3.3.2 Decisions in revealing himself to his mother

3.3.2.1 Decision to write the letter

Little Dog's search for happiness is evident throughout the novel. As the novel is a letter written to his mother who does not speak English, Little Dog exposes everything without reservations. The reader can sense that the things Little Dog writes are those that he wishes his mother could know and understand about him in an ideal world. "I only have the nerve to tell you what comes after because the chance this letter finds you is slim – the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling possible" (Vuong, 2020, p. 112). Writing this letter in itself is something done in pursuit of happiness and inner peace. He writes the letter around five months after Lan's death and at a time when Rose is already severely schizophrenic. He starts the letter with: "Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you – even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are" (Vuong, 2020, p. 3). Knowing that he is not able to confess everything he would wish to to his mother, Little Dog uses the epistolary mode to reflect on his own as well as his family's identity. He also uses it to feel closer to his mother and grandmother by reflecting on his life and everything they have done for him. This is evident when he often comments on his mother and grandmother's actions. He does this from a distant while also emotionally involved perspective. This means that he is not looking at his mother and grandmother with anxiety, but rather from a place of wanting to understand them and forgive them for all of the mistakes they made in raising him; while he does not tell them so, it is something that helps him preserve his inner peace.

As Little Dog reflects a lot, writing this letter was surely a conscious choice to let go of his past, forgive his mother and grandmother and move on. To Little Dog, having something to forgive does not mean that he is holding anything against his mother and grandmother. Rather, it means making peace with the values they were raised into that then burdened both them and him. This is evident when talking about subservience and how he behaved the same as his mother, or when talking about the homophobia in Vietnamese culture. He writes the letter to his mother in order to be closer to her and put himself in her shoes to better understand her motives and, consequently, himself.

3.3.2.2 Decision to have difficult conversations with his mother

Throughout the novel, Little Dog gradually adds different pieces to the story in a non-linear manner, breaking away from a strictly chronologically ordered narrative. The information he provides becomes more and more intimate and there is also an increased amount of second person address, meaning he imagines his mother reading and responding to what he is writing about. While the novel is non-linear, with the events not happening chronologically, the reader knows that at the time the two become more connected, Lan is already suffering from a severe form of Alzheimer's and schizophrenia, which might also be a converging circumstance. As he grows up and his identity starts becoming more defined, Little Dog decides to tell his mother that he is gay. Speaking of the day when he told her this, he writes "The kind of day, I had hoped, where the bond between two people might be decided on easily," (Vuong, 2020, p. 129), showing that he is consciously thinking about the possible effects of confessing his homosexuality to his mother. Although Little Dog is very nervous about telling his mom this and even proposes to move out, his mother responds "You don't have to go anywhere. It's just you and me, Little Dog. I don't have anyone else" (Vuong, 2020, p. 131). Contrary to what he was expecting, she is not very disappointed in her son, but rather more concerned. She expresses her fears and warns him that people will hurt him. Her response affirms Little Dog's wishes for acceptance and, in a way, he becomes more comfortable with his sexuality after this. Their relationship also becomes closer due to Rose's efforts, for example when she tells Little Dog that she was pregnant with another boy before having Little Dog and aborting the child due to not having sufficient funds. She tells him this right after he has confessed his homosexuality to her. She notices that she was the same age Little Dog is at the moment and while she has previously told Little Dog that he does not even know what he likes because he is only seventeen, she realises she also made difficult decisions at that age. By telling him this story, she in a way validates Little Dog's feelings. With this, she also lets him know that he "is the son [she] decided to keep" (Vuong, 2020, p. 140).

Holding such difficult conversations is a consequence of Little Dog's conscious decision for his mother to know the real him, and even more importantly it is something that he finds necessary to even continue their relationship.

4 Evaluation

Hypothesis 1, stating *The motivation behind decisions becomes less conscious with every generation*, is rejected.

If we only look at the first two generations – Rose and Lan – this hypothesis could be confirmed. Between them, there is a clear difference. Lan is unhappy in her arranged marriage and therefore runs away to another city, where she finds a job to survive and is then able to move to the United States, which are all very conscious decisions. Rose is already presented with all of the basic necessities that Lan assures her, such as a peaceful life and a home, and her pursuit of happiness is more about her identity and a community, most of which she does not do consciously.

But the difference between Rose and Little Dog is not the same as between Lan and Rose. Little Dog is born into a somewhat more stable family, meaning he has support from his grandmother and mother and always had food and a home. He also deals with some identity struggles, such as Rose, however, he is a more reflective person and thinks a lot about every decision. He is aware of his own motivations and in the novel, he often justifies his decisions to his mother, who he is writing the letter to. Thus, this hypothesis is rejected. While there Rose's decisions are less conscious than Lan's, Little Dog's are more conscious than Rose's.

Hypothesis 2, stating *Each generation's decisions become less existential*, is confirmed.

This hypothesis assumes that each generation's decisions are of lesser existential importance to the character than the previous and this turned out to be true. Lan's decisions enabled her survival from the very beginning – she ran away from the arranged marriage due to being abused, then accepted a job she found shameful in order to survive, and moved to the United States to escape war. These decisions were all extremely important, existential even, as her life depended upon them. In her eyes, even choosing names was in a way of such importance, especially when nicknaming Little Dog so in order for him to stay safe in the difficult times he grew up in.

Rose's decisions are in part intertwined with Lan's as they moved to the United States together as adults, but in general, her decisions were more related to her and the family's

role in American society. She was also responsible for raising Little Dog and ensuring he was safe, such as teaching him to stand up against bullies. However, most of her decisions were not of vital importance such as Lan's.

Little Dog's decisions are even less of existential importance. All of his decisions are to a great extent self-centred – most of them regard his emotional state. This includes decisions about feeling beautiful and worthy of love, feeling connected to his mother and being able to move on and forgive his mother and grandmother in order to feel at peace. Therefore, none are really existential, at least not the ones he discusses the most and are most important to him.

The differences between the three generations are also important to be considered from the perspective of caring for the next generations. An important aspect of Lan and Rose's decision-making was considering their children, whether in a physical sense, such as running away from war to ensure safety, or in an emotional sense, such as preventing bullying and ensuring Little Dog would feel strong enough to stand up to his bullies. Little Dog, however, never mentions future generations, which might be connected to the fact that he is gay and, at the time of writing the letter, single, therefore not planning to start a family. We might thus conclude that less existential thinking is connected with thinking only about oneself and not considering the impact of one's decisions on the future generations.

What is also important to note is something that correlates with hypothesis 3, and that is that when analysing the novel, it is difficult to judge how existential a certain decision is. As has been proved in many psychological experiments, very different experiences can bring the same level of dopamine and therefore two generations whose decisions might look of very different importances will experience them in the same way. While trying to analyse how existential each decision is to a character, we have to be aware of our subjectivity and look at the decisions through the lens of the specific character. We must refrain from assuming that just because a decision is objectively more important, it also feels more important to a character.

Hypothesis 3, stating *The generations' decisions are evident in different ways*, is confirmed.

This hypothesis assumes that we would have to take different approaches in analysing the characters' decisions as they are evident in different ways. This hypothesis is confirmed. Since Little Dog is the narrator, his decisions are most evident. He discusses them and as a very reflective and self-aware person even analyses the reasons why they were made and what he wanted to achieve. He mostly does this by fictitiously explaining them to his mother as she is the person he is writing the letter to. Explanations are often present because, as the reader might assume, he wishes to justify his decisions to his mother. The motives behind Rose's decisions are less evident as the reader is not presented with her perspective. We only read Little Dog's perception of her decisions, based on which the reader can interpret them. It is similar with Lan, however, Little Dog's relationship with her is less close-knit than that with Rose, therefore he analyses it less. This is especially true since at the time of writing the letter, Lan is already dead and even during most of the events Little Dog describes, she was already suffering from a severe form of Alzheimer's and schizophrenia. Thus, Little Dog is less connected to her and never talks with her about her decisions. The reader can thus interpret the motives for Lan's decisions on the basis of Little Dog's retelling.

5 Conclusion

The novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong gives insight into the life of an immigrant family and their different struggles and choices. We have discovered their In answering the research question How do the novel's main characters' decisions reflect their pursuit of happiness in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*?, we found that the decisions made in pursuit of happiness are both conscious and unconscious. We also found that with each of the three generations, the decisions became less existentially important. I had to change my form of analysis for each character as their decisions are portrayed differently. For the mother and grandmother, there could always be some discrepancies because my research was based entirely on Little Dog's descriptions and theoretical knowledge. Little Dog's descriptions are possibly sometimes misleading as he is bound to be subjective and unreliable even unintentionally while firstly presenting his side of the story.

The contribution of this research paper is that it researches a topic that has so far been under-researched, focusing on the two most important female figures in Little Dog's life. This research paper analyses the main characters' decisions that were important for the course of Little Dog's life as well. In particular, the paper sheds light on how the motivation behind the decisions of different generations grows less existential and more emotional and intimate, relating less to one's physical existence but to one's emotional and psychological well-being.

6 Social responsibility

This research paper was written with keeping in mind the responsibilities of writing about minorities. No individual rights were disregarded and no minority purposefully assaulted. I made sure to analyse all the characters in a multifaceted way and not to share any stereotypes and misconceptions. This novel also includes sensitive and important themes such as migration, religion, nationality, sexuality etc., all of which were addressed ethically. Further, we believe that such themes need to be continually addressed openly and be part of a societal discourse, ensuring a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions.

I made sure to correctly cite all used literature not to steal their authors' intellectual property. The literature chosen was used in a proper way to give additional information and perspective to the fictional story.

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