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The Body as a Site of Violence, Resistance and Explorations of Sexuality in the Poetry of Ocean Vuong and Fatimah Asghar

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Abstract:

The 20th century, plagued by the atrocities of war, has carried into the next century its valise full of past trauma and tragic memory. With this baggage, a generation of poets and writers has been raised who not only had to confront the spectres of the past but also deal with its catastrophic aftermath of current times. In this regard, both the Vietnam War and the Partition of India have a ghastly history of violence attached to them, and at the centre of it are two contemporary poets whose parents immigrated to the US, away from their war-torn motherlands, in hope of a better future, and whose lives were affected by the lived experiences and the generational trauma of their elders. Both Ocean Vuong and Fatimah Asghar in their debut collections, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *If They Come for Us* respectively, deal with the predicament of a complex identity formed by the intersections of several marginalities while also exploring the various facets of sexuality and finding a voice as queer poets to assert their selfhood. This paper thus attempts to closely examine the similarities of themes in terms of past and present trauma instigated upon the body and a celebration of sexuality, unbound by heteronormative standards, in both collections, while studying their unique perspectives that bring to the table the wide-ranging landscapes of 21st century Asian American poetry.

Keywords: 21st century poetry, immigrant literature, intergenerational trauma, sexuality, Asian American literature, Ocean Vuong, Fatimah Asghar.

“Here”, she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass.”

– Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The term immigrant has an association of foreignness about itself that more often than not tends to obscure issues of identity, culture, and nationhood, than resolve them. The body of an immigrant is often looked upon as an alien entity that's out of place in the country of its residence. Add to that the trauma of history that often prompts the emigrant's migration, especially to developed nations, like United States of America which paints a phantom of a dream that's almost always out of reach for the alien dreamers, as well as the quest to rediscover oneself by losing themselves in a country that might always see them as Other, and you have the perfect cocktail of sentiments that contest each-other and yet converge to inform the experience of a marginalised body.

21st century poetry in this regard has been more inclusive and accepting of these diverse voices. Works written by, for, and about marginalized communities have begun to emerge and a refreshing surge of diversity has appeared upon the stage. This, however, does not resolve the issue of discrimination, inequity and lack of representation, but rather draws attention to these concerns, and the experiences and trauma of said communities.

The following paper is an attempt to contribute to this dialogue of inclusiveness of the Other by undertaking a comparative study of the debut collections of Vietnamese American poet Ocean Vuong and Pakistani-Kashmiri-American poet Fatimah Asghar – namely *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and *If They Come for Us*. This study in no way intends to compare the vastly different experiences of both poets, but rather hopes to examine how both poets use the “body” to interpret and acknowledge the intergenerational trauma dealt to them by the cruel hands of history, and how they transcend beyond the suffering to use the body as a site for resistance to all that's restraining of their spirit and as a celebration of all that makes them their authentic selves. In this regard, it is important to consider that both collections not only present two different sides of contemporary Asian American poetry but also explore the territories of sexuality beyond the binaries, with two queer poets taking us on a journey of self-discovery and ascendance from past trauma to the promises the future holds for them.

Sink before you enter

Both collections' opening poems begin with an act of sinking to the ground, whether it be kneeling or being lowered into the grave; a humbling experience – both for the speaker of the text and the reader who's thrust into the reality of an Othered voice. Marginalised on the basis of race and ethnicity, marginalised on the basis of sexuality.

While Vuong's poem calls into consciousness a kind of "threshold" that both the speaker and the reader are about to cross in the eponymic poem, where we find ourselves kneeling with the speaker, listening to the forbidden song, falling to the ground with the knowledge of being an unannounced spectator, and in return, an accomplice to the deed, "In the body, where everything has a price, / I was a beggar. On my knees ..." ("Threshold"); Asghar's poem takes us straight into the tragic truth of terror attacks, of being part of a race, ethnicity, religion, community that is not only discriminated against but also persecuted for being who they are. The first poem, dedicated to the lives lost in the massacre at Peshawar's Army Public School in December 2014, where 6 gunmen affiliated to Taliban murdered 134 school children (Dawn 2019), is a testament to the horrors of the 21st century: "From the moment our babies are born / are we meant to lower them into the ground?" ("For Peshawar").

Both poets rely heavily on the image of body as a site of violence, trauma, pain, and death, and so arises the equally important metaphor of living. The life of an immigrant, especially an immigrant of colour, is but one filled with the everyday struggle of being Othered, being castaways amidst the dominant racial hierarchies – the act itself occurs to diminish and in the end destroy that which does not fit into the dominant's social and power structure. Moreover, the history of United States of America, and in fact any Western country, is built on the backs of the marginalised and oppressed, while inflicting violence, trauma, and pain upon them and breaking their backs to profit off their labour. So once again, the question of being alive and living a natural life concluding in a death not caused by human-made reasons is a feat of celebration for the Other.

This is a fact that Ocean Vuong reiterates in one of his interviews – reminiscing the cautioning his elders issued him: "Don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese. That's one strike against you" (2019), fade away, be invisible if you wish to live without fear, if you wish to live.

This sentiment also finds a home in his poems, and that in the introductory poem itself with "For in the body, where everything has a price, // I was alive" ("Threshold").

The act of staying alive takes a very different meaning in the opening poem of Asghar's collection, where she wishes upon the children lost to the violence of the Peshawar attack a mundane life, a life filled with inaction and everyday monotony – a wish made in retrospection: "I wish them a mundane life [...] A life. Alive. I promise" ("For Peshawar").

The difficulties of life-living

A life is not an assured contract, a certainty, for marginalised people of colour who break and mould the racial hierarchies and social systems of the dominant forces in more ways than one.

If you must know anything, know that the hardest task is to live only once. (Vuong, “Immigrant Haibun”)

Asghar cautions us in her work that violence, death, an uncertainty of life is just around the corner for those who are fated to lead the life of the Other: “In all our family histories, one wrong / turn & then, death” (“For Peshawar”).

In fact, if you are to step into the shoes of a person of colour in the United States of America, and if you’re to experience the song of their life, you must know that there is no returning, because you are bound to get lost side-stepping the dominant gaze at every turn while making peace with the punitive rhythms of marginality.

I didn’t know the cost // of entering a song – was to lose / your way back // So I entered. So I lost. (Vuong, “Threshold”)

It is also substantial to emphasise that the trauma of living presented in both collections is not only the trauma of survival as a marginalised community, but also the past trauma of a history inked with violence, of an intergenerational trauma where both poets’ immigrant parents were victims of wars waged upon their nations, identities and selfhood.

While Vuong’s grandmother’s and mother’s reality is steeped in the horrors of Vietnam war where about 4 million lives were lost (Dunham 2008), Asghar’s American identity arises out of her parents’ escape from the horrors that encircled the aftermath of Partition of India, and the occupation of Kashmir. As Asghar states in an interview (2018), and also in the introductory note of her collection, and as has been discoursed upon in recent times, the horrors and violence of Partition is not talked about much (outside the subcontinent) even though close to 14 million lives were displaced in the process and about 2 million lives lost. (Doshi and Mehdi 2017)

This may be in part due to the belief that the Partition of India was an internal conflict characterised by all that is savage, brutal, and uncivilised, hence it is undeserving of finding a place in the pages of modern history, and hence it must be relegated to the footnotes.

As Michael Humphrey writes in *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation: From terror to trauma*,

In the recent media reporting on war there is a clear distinction between the atrocity and barbarity of internal ‘ethnic wars’ expressed in the horrors of ethnic cleansing, and the measured violence of modern warfare between states fought at a distance according to the laws of war. The juxtaposition of these forms of violence is meant to suggest that ethnic war harks back to an earlier Hobbesian world, before law regulated war and made it more humane. (43)

But the truth of Partition is more nuanced than that. A provocation of British imperialism, the Partition of India not only pandered to the political interests of a select few but also profited the colonising forces, and thus the seeds were sown by the colonisers themselves, and whose fulfilment was supervised by Cyril Radcliffe, a British law lord who had never made it to Asia, much less India, before being assigned the humongous task of deciding the fates and identities of millions of people in a matter of few weeks. (Kapoor 2019) Thus, the Partition of India was never an internal skirmish but a carrier of Britain’s final blow to one of its colonies who dared to demand back its independence. And perhaps this viciousness and politics of division inspires Asghar to nurture her collection with 7 Partition poems, that not only recount the horrors of the Partition of India but also stretch themselves to accommodate the partitions of everyday living. As Yasmin Adele Majeed writes of Asghar,

She expands the scope of “Partition” to include the violence of WWII, the Islamophobia of post-9/11 America and Trump, Beyoncé, the “partitioning” of the apartment she grew up in. The “partition” of *If They Come For Us* memorializes the violence of borders by refusing the limits of the word partition itself. It is a deliberate rejection of a colonial logic... (The Radical Metaphor of 'If They Come For Us')

Remarkably, Asghar observes how very rarely do we call the Partition war, even though it was one – a country divided on religious lines, the millions of lives lost and the tens of million

lives traumatised for the decades to come – the Partition was no less than a blood-spattered war snatching the soul away from a people and their identity.

The house packed / in twenty minutes, suitcase / crammed with toys & attah. // The war / no one calls war / crisps my Ullu's tongue. (Asghar, "Partition" no. 7)

The trauma of war

The trauma of Partition is one that spills over and across generations, a collective tryst with horror, a collective guilt for all nations involved which neither wants to address:

cousins partitioned from cousins, / mothers partitioned from child, // neighbors spearing neighbors, / women, virgins, jumping into wells // so full with people they can't / find water to drown. (Asghar, "They Asked for a Map")

On the other hand, we have the curious case of Vuong. If the Partition of India was an ancillary effect of British colonialism and imperialism, America's involvement in Vietnam war was a direct consequence of American imperialism. And out of that involvement arises Vuong's complex identity – since his grandfather was an American soldier and his grandmother a Vietnamese farm girl who met him during the war.

An American soldier f-- a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me. // Yikes. ("Notebook Fragments")

And so, in both collections, we see the albatross of collected intergenerational trauma of war strung around every participant's neck, intricately feathered with complexities of the self, identity, and remembrance. The memory of the elders becomes the history of the two poets, the stories become anecdotes and cautionary tales, the suffering of one generation becomes the lesson for another, braided together in the poetry of language, with an imaginative refocusing and retelling.

Violence / not an *over there* but a memory lurking / in our blood, waiting to rise. (Asghar, "For Peshawar")

In the reiteration of these horrors through imagery of verse, a shift occurs, and yet the kernel of experience, sensation, feeling remains the same. In *Third-Generation Holocaust*

Representation (Victoria Aarons; Alan L. Berger), we find a passage that largely applies itself to the poems of Vuong and Asghar as well:

The movement from memory into history suggests passage from the immediacy and proximity of a subjective retention of and reencounter with memories of the past to the opacity of absent or indeterminate memory. What happens when memory becomes history, when, that is, the texture, the sensation, and the presence of memory in the convergence of past and present become contained within the fixed boundaries and inertness of temporality, that is, into a story? Here memory is apart from the teller rather than a part of, intrinsic to, the teller and thus can only be made accessible through an imaginative refocusing. (42)

And thus, in Vuong's work, the memory of trauma from the fall of Saigon develops from:

A military truck speeds through the intersection, children / shrieking inside. A bicycle hurled / through a store window. When the dust rises, a black dog / lies panting in the road. Its hind legs / crushed into the shine / of a white Christmas. ("Aubade with Burning City")

And goes on to evolve into a sombre, post-apocalyptic kind of experience:

The sky was September-blue and the pigeons went on pecking at bits of bread scattered from the bombed bakery. Broken baguettes. Crushed croissants. Guttled cars. A carousel spinning its blackened horses. He said the shadow of missiles growing larger on the sidewalk looked like god playing an air piano above us. ("Immigrant Haibun")

Thereby translating to images of bodily acts of aggressions, sometimes out of anger, other times out of fear; sometimes in the form of mythology, as in Vuong's second poem of the collection: "Like any good son, I pull my father out / of the water, drag him by his hair" ("Telemachus"). Or in images of gun-violence and other acts of terror in the collection:

The last time / I saw him run like that, he had / a hammer in his fist, mother / a nail-length out of reach. / America. America a row of streetlights / flickering on his whiskey / -lips as we ran. A family / screaming down Franklin Ave. / ADD. PTSD.

POW. Pow. Pow. Pow / says the sniper. (“In Newport I Watch My Father Lay His Cheek to a Beached Dolphin’s Wet Back”)

In fact, the gun is a recurrent motif in Vuong’s poems: “The answer / is the bullet hole in his back, / brimming with seawater” (“Telemachus”). It arises intermittently, in between tender moments, in between moments of intimacy, in between everyday living, a testimony to the tale of the immigrant hiding, fighting, for his life, to not be seen, to not be erased:

I open / the shoe box dusted with seven winters // & here, sunk in folds of yellowed news / -paper, lies the Colt .45 – silent & heavy // as an amputated hand. I hold the gun / & wonder if an entry wound in the night // would make a hole wide as morning. (“Always & Forever”)

This violence of the body/on the body finds its way into Asghar’s collection as well; dripping from the past blood-stained fingers of Partition into the present violence upon Othered identities in America. It begins with “you’re kashmiri until they burn your home. take your orchards. stake a different flag. until no one remembers the road that brings you back” (“Partition” no. 1); to the present-day dilemmas of a brown body rooted in a nation, a religion vehemently discriminated against:

you’re pakistani until they start throwing acid. you’re muslim until it’s too dangerous. you’re safe until you’re alone. you’re american until the towers fall. until there’s a border on your back. (“Partition” no. 1)

In this regard, a heart-rending tragedy from the pages of American history that torments the speaking voice in both collections, and which fragments and haunts the consciousness of both poets, is the September 11 attack, which redefines the marginality and threatens the acceptance of the Othered identity, of people of colour, into the fabric of America, in both works.

A tragedy and an act of violence and hatred begets more violence and hatred, a ripple effect of the horrors that feed upon modern society, a call to banish, or worse, extinguish all that is foreign, alien, immigrant. A flame that imprints another trauma, another kind of fear into the mind of the Other.

While Vuong breaches the subject subtly,

They say the sky is blue / but I know it's black seen through too much distance. /
 You will always remember what you were doing / when it hurts the most [...] The
 TV kept saying *The planes ... The planes ...* & I stood waiting in the room made
 of broken mockingbirds. (“*Untitled (Blue, Green, & Brown)*”: oil on canvas: Mark
 Rothko: 1952”)

Asghar is more direct in her account of the bleakness of her experience, she tells us: “It
 was the summer the TV told me I was dangerous / & I tried to learn Spanish so I could pretend
 / I was the other kind of other” (“The Last Summer of Innocence”). Then goes on to share small
 but weighty anecdotes from her life post 9/11: “Two hours after the towers fell I crossed the
 ship / out on the map. I buried it under a casket of / scribbles” (“Oil”). Underscoring the
 silencing of an entire community of people, then, that trails perniciously as an aftermath of a
 tragedy, Asghar articulates: “The towers fell two weeks / ago & I can't say *blow* out loud or
 everyone will hate me” (“Oil”).

Indeed, Vuong's take of 9/11 is unique in its imagery that effects a jittery feeling upon
 the reader: “There are over 13,000 unidentified body parts from the World Trade Center being
 stored in an underground repository in New York City. // Good or bad?” (“Notebook
 Fragments”)

Ode to sexuality

Good or bad? This set of binaries torments the speaking voice in both collections on more
 counts than one. While identity is an overriding aspect of discourse in the collections, sexuality
 too becomes a poignant point of discussion in a majority of their poems. An exploration of
 sexuality often leads to a conflict with oneself as one wonders whether how they feel is
 “normal”, is a transient state of mind, or is acceptable to the societal order.

“what do I do with the boy / who snuck his way inside / me on my childhood playground?”
 begins Asghar in “Boy” and elaborates upon it, a few lines later: “I have a boy inside me & I
 don't know / how to tell people. like when / that man held me down & we said no”.

This dilemma, this internal struggle that comes with the explorations of queer bodies – this quest to be accepted, or at least understood, to find a sense of belonging, a kind of refuge or assurance that it is fine to be who you are, and moreover, to transcend the boxes society tries to fit everyone into and not feel threatened or abandoned reminds us of how the politics of heteronormativity and its obliteration of queer bodies works. In Judith Butler’s words, “compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic” (312). But the reality that supersedes the forcible paradigms of heterosexuality is that it “is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself – and failing” (313).

In this regard, Vuong’s work celebrates the queer self; the speaking voice does not allow the violence of the body to intimidate, repress or diminish the truth of the soul; instead, each poem that participates in the exploration of sexuality and one’s own self comes out triumphant as “he steps into a red dress” (“Trojan”) and allows love and tenderness to take over:

Your hand / under my shirt as static / intensifies on the radio [...] This means I won’t be / afraid if we’re already / here. Already more than skin / can hold. That a boy sleeping / beside a boy / must make a field / full of ticking. (“On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”)

Even amidst all the violence and trauma that queer and Othered bodies go through, there’s a defiant strain of resistance, an unyielding spirit of not backing down or shying away from one’s true self. Dedicating a poem written in a rather unique form made entirely of footnotes to Michael Humphrey and Clayton Capshaw, the gay couple murdered by immolation in their home in Dallas in April 2011 (dallas voice 2011), he begins thus: “As if my finger, / tracing your collarbone / behind closed doors, / was enough / to erase myself. To forget / we built this house knowing / it won’t last” (Vuong, “Seventh Circle of Earth”). And ends with “Laughter ashed / to air / to honey to baby / darling, / look. Look how happy we are / to be no one / & still American”.

Another interesting pattern to note with regards to both collections is that in both, the speaking voice calls out to their mother, and therefore the traditionally feminine force which is soft, juxtaposed against the patriarchal society and its rigid models, to help them come to terms

with their identity and sexuality, to guide them in the path of self-discovery. Mothers are usually associated with tenderness and being the nurturer, the embodiment of gentleness and comfort. Mothers, in general, also tend to be the safe place a child can confide in because under her wings, they know they are protected, they are aware that “only a mother can walk / with the weight / of a second beating heart” (Vuong, “Headfirst”). Given that both had no connection to their fathers from a very young age, it is still a turning point in both collections, especially in *If They Come for Us* since Asghar lost both her parents as a toddler, and yet in matters of tenderness, the softness of identity and selfhood, she calls out to the maternal.

While in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, the voice exclaims “O mother, / O minute hand, teach me / how to hold a man the way thirst / holds water” (“A Little Closer to the Edge”); in *If They Come for Us*, it questions,

Mother, where are you? How would / you have taught me to be a woman? // A man? Can you help me? Each day / without you I pile questions // & whisper them to your new body, / the earth & the grass laughs // in my face. (“Other Body”)

In fact, while reading these lines one cannot help but think of Simone de Beauvoir’s unforgettable words: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (273). Nevertheless, the beauty of the collection lies in how it succeeds to surpass the binaries of heterosexuality, as the poet announces “I never had enough kens / so I made my barbies f-- / each other” (Asghar, “Playroom”) and qualifies it in an assertive tone with “I controlled / in my playroom. / Whole cities of beautiful / women, boundless” (“Playroom”).

Gentleness and a call to hope

Returning to Vuong’s collection, Claire Schwartz in her review writes:

In *Night Sky*, violence lives in close proximity to love. Vuong recalls that violence and desire are both shades of intimacy, the laying on of hands always inflected by want [...] Even as the poems in *Night Sky* bear witness to violence, they also map the ways that gentleness might—and does—live. (Review: *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong)

And so, in the concluding poem of the collection, there's a shift – a shift to gentleness, a call to celebrate and turn a new chapter in life. Curiously, the poem begins with “Instead”, as if to stop the reader from chewing upon the violence of the body that may have distressed them in the previous poems, and choose instead hope, celebration, a turning of leaf – to not dwell upon trauma and anguish of an Othered body, but to see also its strength, resilience and its partaking in pleasure: “Instead, the year begins / with my knees / scraping hardwood, / another man leaving / into my throat” (Vuong, “Devotion”). “Ocean, don't be afraid” (“Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong”) is a promise the voice lives up to in the poem, as it ends on a triumphant note: “I / never asked for flight. / Only to feel / this fully, this / entire” (“Devotion”).

This celebration of hope and courage also marks the end of Asghar's collection. In her concluding poem, she celebrates the brownness of her body and identity, instead of latching on to the trauma and violence of a body tattered by conflicts external and internal. She exultantly states, “my compass / is brown & gold & blood” (“If They Come for Us”) and ends with lines that must be stated in full:

Mashallah I claim them all / my country is made / in my people's image / if they
come for you they / come for me too in the dead / of winter a flock of / aunties step
out on the sand / their dupattas turn to ocean / a colony of uncles grind their palms
/ & a thousand jasmines bell the air / my people I follow you like constellations /
we hear glass smashing the street / & the nights opening dark / our names this
country's wood / for the fire my people my people / the long years we've survived
the long / years yet to come I see you map / my sky the light your lantern long /
ahead & I follow I follow

It is as if both poets, through their collections, refuse to reduce their fullness to the traumatic experiences that shape them, but instead rise above the white gaze to rejoice in their celebration of the myriad shades of resistance of the repressive elements, and acknowledge their everyday victories, ending their collections on a note of sanguinity and anticipation – of the potential of a living that's rebelliously hopeful.

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