

**METAPHORS OF TRAUMA IN ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS  
AND HOURIS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**  
**МЕТАФОРИ ТРАВМИ В РОМАНАХ «НА ЗЕМЛІ МИ ТРОХИ ЧУДОВІ» І «ГУРІ»:  
ПОРІВНЯЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ**

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This comparative study of trauma metaphors, specifically in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and Kamel Daoud's *Houris*, examines metaphor as a linguistic and cognitive paradigm through which trauma can be expressed. Based on trauma theory and conceptual metaphor theory, the study provides an analysis of the ways trauma is resistant to direct articulation and how it finds articulation in metaphorical constructs that reveal fragmented memory, identity, and suffering. It explores how metaphorical language acts not only as a means of expressing trauma but also as a tool for understanding its complex and layered nature. By employing metaphors, these narratives illuminate trauma's deeper psychological and cultural dimensions, allowing readers to grasp its intergenerational and collective impact.

Much of Vuong's metaphor, which is based on the Vietnamese-American immigrant experience, draws on organic, bodily, and spatial imagery to signal intergenerational trauma, displacement, and cultural alienation. As informed by Algeria's colonial past, Daoud's metaphors use spatial and existential semiotics to convey exile and the inheritance of colonial violence. Their novels each trace trauma as an individual and collective experience. Vuong's bodily metaphors stress trauma's inheritance across generations, framing the body as a vessel of memory and suffering. The broken bones in the title are not physical but represent emotional wounds, and horizontal and vertical spatial metaphors trap the protagonist in displacement and liminality between his Vietnamese ancestors and American mother. Daoud's metaphors of body and space echo postcolonial trauma, with the body representing Algeria's historical hurts and metaphors of space depicting dislocation and liminality.

So, both narratives use metaphor to reveal the sublime links between trauma, identity, and cultural memory. While Vuong uses bodily and spatial metaphors to express learned trauma, Daoud has an exile and confinement lexicon to capture collective suffering. Together, these works suggest that, while emerging from separate historical and cultural settings, trauma operates through common metaphoric forms.

**Key words:** metaphor theory, trauma metaphors, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Kamel Daoud's *Houris*, Postcolonial literature.

Дослідження метафор травми, зокрема в романах Оушена Вуонга «На землі ми трохи чудові» та Камеля Дауда «Гурі», аналізує метафору як лінгвістичну та когнітивну парадигму, через яку можна виразити травматичний досвід. Спираючись на теорію травми та концептуальну теорію метафори, дослідження розкриває, як травма опирається прямому вираженню та знаходить форму через метафоричні конструкції, що віддзеркалюють фрагментовану пам'ять, ідентичність і страждання. Дослідження також показує, що метафорична мова виступає не лише засобом вираження травми, а й інструментом для розуміння її складної й багатошарової природи. Використовуючи метафори, ці наративи висвітлюють глибші психологічні та культурні аспекти травми, дозволяючи читачам досягнути її міжпоколіннєві та колективні наслідки.

Метафори Вуонга, засновані на досвіді в'єтнамсько-американських іммігрантів, опираються на органічні, тілесні та просторові образи, які сигналізують про міжпоколіннєву травму, втрату дому та культурне відчуження. Метафори Дауда, сформовані колоніальним минулим Алжиру, використовують просторову та екзистенційну семіотику для передачі вигнання та спадщини колоніального насильства. Обидва романи простежують травму як індивідуальний і колективний досвід. Тілесні метафори Вуонга підкреслюють спадковість травми між поколіннями, зображуючи тіло як посудину пам'яті та болю. Зламани кістки в назві символізують не фізичні, а емоційні рани, а горизонтальні й вертикальні просторові метафори відображають відчуження та перебування в стані лімінальності між в'єтнамськими предками та американською матір'ю. Метафори тіла й простору в романі Дауда також резонують із постколоніальною травмою: тіло символізує історичні рани Алжиру, а просторові метафори відображають дислокацію та лімінальність.

Таким чином, обидва наративи використовують метафори, щоб розкрити тонкі зв'язки між травмою, ідентичністю та культурною пам'яттю. Вуонг звертається до тілесних і просторових метафор для вираження успадкованої травми, тоді як Дауд застосовує метафори вигнання та ув'язнення для відображення колективних страждань. Разом ці твори демонструють, що, хоча їхній контекст формувався в різних історичних і культурних умовах, травма проявляється через спільні метафоричні форми.

**Ключові слова:** теорія метафори, метафори травми, «На землі ми трохи чудові» Оушена Вуонга, «Гурі» Камеля Дауда, постколоніальна література.

**Introduction.** Metaphor is a key cognitive instrument (and linguistic resource) for narrating trauma through personal and collective narratives [6]. This is in line with trauma theory, which suggests that trauma is resistant to direct articulation and, instead, must be spoken of metaphorically before it can be understood [1]. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* [8] and Kamel Daoud's *Houris* [3] are both examples of this phenomenon, using the metaphor in availing the complex terrains of memory, identity and suffering. Thus, by analyzing the metaphorical constructs woven into these texts' language, this research seeks to identify how trauma is linguistically inscribed and how metaphor is a process of obfuscation yet also a process of revelation.

Both Vuong and Daoud confront trauma as an intergenerational and sociocultural phenomenon, but their metaphorical strategies diverge in their particular historical and linguistic contexts. Dependent on the Vietnamese-American immigrant experience, Vuong's novel [8] uses organic and bodily metaphors to illustrate trauma as an act of inheritance and mutation [7]. On the other hand, Daoud's *Houris* [3], underpinned by postcolonial Algerian frameworks, entwines religious with spatial semiotics to question the inheritance of colonial violence and existential exile [4]. These contrasting metaphorical constructions simultaneously reflect the specific cultural workings of trauma as well as the cross-culturally shared impulse to render pain in distinctively figurative language.

Tracing the connections through a linguistic lens, this article **aims** to analyze the larger area of metaphor theory and trauma studies in the literature. Building upon conceptual metaphor theory [5] and discourse analysis [2], this study explores the role of metaphors not just as stylistic devices, but also as active elements shaping the portrayal of trauma and resilience.

**Literature Overview.** Literature and encoding trauma in language have been crucial areas of inquiry. Cathy Caruth's foundational text for trauma studies, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), attends to trauma as an experience that cannot be easily narrated. Trauma, Caruth writes, is not an event that occurs but a delayed experience that comes to us in fragmented and often non-linear ways via memory and narrative. She argues that trauma is not fully comprehended at the moment

it is happening and needs a narrative form that mirrors its disjointedness. This definition of trauma as a sort of elusive yet omnipresent concept sets the stage for analyzing trauma metaphors in literature, as metaphors are one of the most common ways trauma is communicated (albeit indirectly) and understood.

Trauma is primarily encoded in language and thus is most often conveyed through metaphor. Metaphors serve not only as ornamental figures of speech; they are cognitive tools shaping how we understand abstract and complex experiences like trauma. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson [6] discuss how metaphors are not just a festive decoration but are deeply embedded in ordinary thought and everyday language. That metaphorical language mirrors how people understand experiences and try to understand complicated ideas. The lens of conceptual metaphors is important for our analysis of the metaphorical representation of trauma in literature. The novels *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong [8] and *Houris* by Kamel Daoud [3] show how trauma is metaphorically treated at the levels of both myth and language in different cultures.

While metaphor is a key linguistic tool for depicting trauma, the context in which it is used is just as significant. Jonathan Hiddleston [4] highlights the ways in which postcolonial literature, especially works from Algeria, engage with trauma as a legacy of colonial violence. In his analysis of Kamel Daoud's *Houris*, Hiddleston examines how Daoud's metaphors integrate the historical scars left by colonialism and the cultural exile that results from it. These metaphors are not only a reflection of personal trauma but also serve as a commentary on the collective memory of postcolonial societies. Daoud's use of metaphor, as Hiddleston argues, emphasizes the spatial and existential dimensions of trauma, making the metaphors in *Houris* distinctly postcolonial and rooted in the Algerian context.

This immigrant experience uniquely informs the metaphors of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a story that, like Ling Ma's, is sown with the seeds of displacement, loss, an ongoing struggle to constitute individual identity. For example, the "belly" part illustrates how Vuong [8] manifests bodily and organic metaphors in his work to represent the transgenerational trauma of migrants within their families [7].

The novel bears witness to the life of a Vietnamese-American family, whose DNA is stitched with trauma as the trauma is passed down in the generation. This is one way to explain why these metaphors are so important to understanding how trauma is not only an individual but collective, intergenerational, and embedded in the fate of a culture.

The relationship between metaphor and trauma is also being explored in the field of metaphor theory. *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation* provides an in-depth exploration of metaphors as they operate across cultures and languages [5]. Kövecses advances that although some metaphors might be universal, others are highly inscribed within the specific cultural and historical scenarios in which they are produced/activated. This idea is indispensable for making sense of the ways in which trauma metaphors vary across cultural boundaries. For instance, Vuong's metaphors of trauma, set in Vietnamese history, play out with Daoud's metaphors, which are reflective of the postcolonial Algerian experience. Viewing these works through Kövecses' framework, it becomes evident how, although the experience of trauma is shared, it is molded through different cultural narratives and specific histories that inform each text.

A metaphor analysis, particularly in literary texts, provides a compelling lens through which to examine trauma dynamics. Jonathan Charteris-Black [2], in *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis*, emphasizes, metaphors are not only ornamental devices but may also have deep ideological implications and shape people's cognition of the world. Focused on *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and *Houris*, this study examines these metaphors to explore how the re-distribution and mutation of specific metaphors plays a role in the configuration of trauma in these novels. It reshapes how we think about trauma not simply as an individual phenomenon but as a collective one, tied to language, culture and history.

**Methodology.** This paper adopts a linguistic-based approach of metaphor analysis to carry out a comparative investigation of the metaphorical representation of trauma in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* [8] and Kamel Daoud's *Houris* [3]. Using conceptual metaphor theory as its framework [6], the first half of the study explores and catalogs the major trauma-related metaphors in both novels. Here this close reading of the texts focuses, especially, on the overlapping metaphorical themes of body, space, the organic, and those of memory, identity and displacement. Identifying such metaphors depends both on linguistic intuition and on established guidelines of metaphor identification [2]. Once the metaphors have been identified, the following step is to assess their

functional relevance, weighing their broader thematic concerns, especially in relation to cultural and historical contexts in which the novels can be placed.

In order to do this, the analysis takes a comparative approach and shows how the metaphorization in each of the texts responds to the writers' sociocultural contexts. To this end, we further explore how Daoud's postcolonial Algerian context shapes his use of metaphors, especially those that draw upon colonial history and existential exile [4]. Immigrant trauma and intergenerational memory are used to analyze Vuong's use of metaphors [7] – similarly. Such an in-depth approach allows the study to interpret how each author uses metaphor to mediate trauma, connecting individual sorrow to cultural history and identity politics.

**Results and Discussion.** Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* utilizes an organic, bodily, and spatial metaphorical structure to articulate the protagonist's trauma in various registers and constitutive orders. In particular, the imagery in the novel that conveys trauma is also a metaphor, and the body itself is the novel's primary symbol for trauma's psychic and physical effects – the violence, loss, and displacement people buried in those coastal dunes experience. Vuong makes a great effect of a broken bone, which she uses as a metaphor for the fragmentation of memory and identity. The narrator, Little Dog, meditates on his relationship with his mother, saying: *I am trying to speak my body. But it is a broken bone in the center of my chest* [8, 64]. Here, the body itself becomes a trauma zone, and the figure of a "broken bone" is both a physical injury and a representation of an emotional shattering. This metaphor highlights the character's desire to explore his violent past and the permanent scars it has left in his life.

Intergenerational trauma remains firmly rooted in bodily metaphors. In fact, when Little Dog writes about his relationship with his mother, he describes it in terms of inherited suffering, trauma that is something bequeathed, encoded in the very tissue of the two of them: *And her pain was my pain, her silence a wound I carry in my blood* [8, 22]. This idea of our pain as a wound we carry in our blood alludes to the essential link between the past and the present, and to trauma as personal as to collective. I love it because it's also related to the metaphor of a body as a vessel for memory, a body in its physical sensation and emotional and historical resonance. Here, blood acts more as a marker of continuity, suggesting that the trauma is not merely a transient event but a cycle that reverberates through the bodies and lives of generations.

Vuong also experiences displacement and alienation through spatial metaphors, on top of bodily ones. For instance, repeated imagery related to borders and

boundaries significantly illustrates the protagonist's struggle to find her way between multiple cultural and emotional landscapes. Little Dog articulates this sense of being trapped in a liminal space: *I am a body between borders, between languages, between families, between love* [8, 100]. This metaphor symbolizes the psychological and cultural chasm that the protagonist senses as he finds himself torn between his Vietnamese roots, his American upbringing, and his need for connection but a fear of rejection. Therefore, the metaphor of being "between borders" carries a sense of in-betweenness; Little Dog is not fully accepted in either world, creating a deep feeling of solitude and internal dichotomy.

Another important metaphor that Vuong employs with respect to trauma is the ocean, which crops up throughout the novel as both a literal and figurative representation of the protagonist's emotional depth and the all-encompassing, overwhelming nature of what he's living through. The ocean symbolizes a vast, lingering presence at home, the strongest, seething reflection of Little Dog's emotional state. In one passage, the narrator reflects: *The ocean is an old song, always playing in my bones* [8, 43]. In this, the ocean metaphor reveals that trauma is an ongoing, cyclical experience, something that keeps arising, something that is deeply rooted in the very core of the main character's being. The ocean, with *its old song*, reinforces familiarity with pain and trauma as if it is an identity the narrator cannot flee but must come to live with.

Finally, Vuong's metaphorical use of language to place barriers, both for self-expression and for reaching others, is a crucial component of the novel's treatment of trauma. Language itself, at times, serves as a husk, if not a cruel mechanism of oppression, that fails to capture the characters' experiences of pain. One touchstone: *I speak to you in words, Little Dog says, but they are only shadows of the things I cannot say* [8, 132]. Here, the words-as-shadows metaphor underscores the inadequacy of language to fully capture the fullness of trauma. The lexeme *shadows* implies that everything she wants to express will always be just out of reach, just beyond the pale of a typical language, which is a theme she dates back to childhood and acts out in terms of trauma. This linguistic lens also exposes how trauma affects our interpretation and use of language – and, in turn, reveals the limitations of language and the body in their ability to capture this profound pain.

In *Houris*, Kamel Daoud [3] examines trauma through various metaphors, none more striking than those of the body, space, and religion. Of the metaphors that have been used to articulate trauma, one of

the most dominant is the body as the site of pain and existential dislocation. The following are some of the key elements of my reading of Harun as a synecdoche of a nation and a political entity Long after the violence ends, meaning that it may never end: In one good passage, Harun muses: *Le corps, tout comme la mémoire, porte les blessures de la guerre, des guerres passées, des guerres intérieures qui ne nous quittent jamais* [3, 45]. This horizontal metaphor equates the body with memory, doling out vessels for literal and figurative wounds that linger long after the events that gave rise to them. The joint trauma of body and mind, as it is in Daoud's novel, makes visible the corporeal realities of violence and the scars of suffering that both fear and bloodshed leave behind, not just for the individual, not just for the nation.

Spatial metaphors are key to Daoud's representation of trauma, particularly as they cling to the ideas of displacement and exile. Harun's story often conjures the concept of being "between spaces," with literal and metaphorical bicultural boundaries creating a gap between the character and his family and old life, through his current space. Daoud explains, in one passage, how Harun's emotional state is *un être pris entre l'ombre et la lumière, entre le corps et l'esprit, entre la mort et la vie* [3, 78]. The metaphor indicates that Harun occupies a liminal space – the point between opposing forces that constitute his trauma: the shadow of death and the light of life, the body's corporeal presence, and the spirit's intangible essence. This moment of evocation of space is crucial for the representation of the inescapable tension between Harun's longing to find peace and the creeping weight of his past.

The metaphor of exile also repetitively appears through religious images such as, rather specifically, the metaphor of Houris – the heavenly virgins of Islam. These "greats" represent in the novel the unattainable and the idealized parts of the protagonist's identity and its desires. When Harun recalls the Houris, he writes about them in relation to his former belonging and desirable future: *Les Houris ne sont que des mirages, des figures que nous n'atteindrons jamais, un rêve qui échappe à ceux qui ont connu la souffrance* [3, 121]. In this sense, the Houris are an unattainable utopia, a spiritual ideal that starkly contrasts with Harun's lived experience of postcolonial trauma and violence. The Houris are thus a symbol of Harun's quest for an unattainable paradise; they embody a spiritual and emotional exile that Harun can never escape.

In Daoud's *Houris*, metaphors of confinement and entrapment also express the psychological effects of trauma. These metaphors are often wrapped around images of cages or barriers that prevent the protag-

onist from moving past the past. In one moment particularly, Harun avows: *Mon esprit est une cage sans issue, une prison où je m'enferme chaque nuit* [3, 160]. The extended metaphor of the mind as a *cage* reinforces the theme of internalized trauma; the psychology of violence and loss manifests as self-imposed imprisonment. Harun's fight to wrest himself from his mental prison parallels the wider, more viscous theme of being trapped that shapes his relationship with both his past and his future. The cage is both a personal trauma and a broader exploration of political and social confinement – where the individual's freedom is stifled by the weight of history and culture.

Finally, Houris employs the metaphor of death as a constant, with trauma tightly woven into existential dread and the fear of erasure. But Harun struggles as he learns how his brother was murdered in a violent attack that is only one of many, why he could not protect him, and what his death says, like the death of so many others in this book and the region, about the environment now, politically and otherwise. *La mort, cette compagne silencieuse, est toujours présente, au coin de chaque rue, dans chaque mot, dans chaque souffle que je prends* [3, 215]. Death is always present in this passage, haunting the periphery of every experience and every conversation. Comparing the trauma to a body with the reader as a silent, only-passively aware observer and the body lying personified as a dead body inflates trauma to not just an event but an ongoing serviced, haunted existence. This understanding of trauma also mirrors the broader postcolonial suffering and persistent psychic consequences of violence that are explored throughout the novel.

Conclusion. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong [8] and *Houris* by Kamel Daoud [3], trauma is delivered in vivid metaphors drawn from the characters' emotional and psychological topographies. These metaphors not only act as a tool to express the extent of personal trauma but also mirror the more significant historical, cultural, and social atmospheres that affect the characters' trauma experience. Vuong's novel [8] is mainly about bodily metaphors, with the body as a site of injury, inheritance, and memory. The protagonist, Little Dog, frequently uses images of brokenness and physical fragmentation to reflect on his emotional scars, showing how trauma is embodied and passed on from generation to generation. Harun's body becomes a metaphor for both individual and collective trauma, and the body itself becomes a site for both physical and emotional wounds in the same way that Daoud uses the body metaphorically. But if Vuong's body is one that attends to that intimacy, the internalization of trauma, Daoud's differs: the body becomes a site of exile, a liminal space between rival forces.

Both novels also play with spatial metaphors to represent displacement and alienation. Vuong's work plays with this imagery: the metaphor of "between borders" is his way of tying the protagonist's cultural, emotional, and physical evocation of his homeland, which has been severed from him to his mother, who constantly reminds him of it. Gonzalez's feeling of living in two worlds resonates with broader themes of immigration, identity, and belonging. Daoud likewise employs spatial metaphors, like Harun's feeling of being "between the shadow and the light," to express the liminality of postcolonial being and Harun's attempt to reconcile his past with his present. Both novels' use of these spatial metaphors highlights the psychological disarticulation brought about by dislocation and the impossibility of belonging wholly to the past, or the future.

A similar notable trope shared across both works is the religious and sublime, idealized metaphors employed to convey the same yearning for an unattainable future. Vuong's hollowing out of the ocean as a metaphor for trauma as cyclical and uninhabitable resonates with Daoud's *Houris* [3], those unattainable ideals and paragons of high virtue. Both authors employ these metaphors to underline the discrepancy between the characters' suffering and their longings for healing, peace, or returning to an idealized past. The Houris in Daoud's novel [3] symbolizes a utopia that can never be achieved, just as the ocean in Vuong's work is simultaneously a destructive agent and an emblem of unending internal strife. These symbols invoke the religious and natural underpinnings of life, suggesting that trauma, in both novels, is not easily transcended but rather a shaper of the character's understandings of one another and their worlds, extending an influence that may never be shaken off.

Through the metaphor of imprisonment, the stories both exemplify the trauma of their restart action and their inability to act. In Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* [8], this metaphor of words as *shadows* underscores the difficulty of articulating trauma through language, whilst Daoud's motif of the mind as a *cage* emphasizes the psychological jail trauma constructs. Both authors considered that trauma is no longer an external experience but such an integrated force inside of the human that it keeps the person in one place in his/her memories and fears. In both novels, the imagery of cages, barriers, and borders evokes the trauma that impedes how characters relate to the world, whether that means reaching out to others or moving past their past.

Lastly, these novels demonstrate that death remains a pervasive metaphor for trauma, integral to the characters' lives and shaping their emotional and psychological states. Where Vuong's novel conveys

death as an all-encompassing, cyclical force – the *mouth* of Harun's country, *like the ocean rising and falling* – Daoud employs death as a silent companion that haunts every aspect of Harun's life. In both narratives, death serves as a metaphor for the way trauma remains unresolved for the characters, how it reappears, and weathers the characters' world and understanding of themselves. Death permeates both novels, illustrating the concept that trauma is not a single event but rather a continuous phenomenon that shapes the individual over time.

Finally, while *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* [8] and *Houris* [3] differ in their historical and cultural contexts, both use metaphors to explore the

nature of trauma deeply. Vuong and Daoud show trauma as an event and a stubborn and formative force in characters' lives through bodily, spatial, religious, and existential metaphors. In reading these two novels, it becomes clear that trauma, while manifesting in different ways, is shared when the metaphors of the body, exile, death, and the violence of memory are intertwined. Both works are ultimately poignant reflections on how trauma informs identity, memory, and the human condition.

Future studies can explore how metaphors of trauma affect language, memory, and identity in the aftermath of violence and displacement in other post-colonial and diasporic literatures.

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