

**Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* (USA: Penguin Press, 2019), Pages: 246, Price: \$ 26.00.**

Reviewed by:

—**KAVYA LAKHANI**

Ph.D Scholar, School of Liberal studies  
Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University  
Gujarat

“Yes, there was a war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name-Lan-in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping. From that, a daughter was born, and from that daughter, a son. All this time I told myself we were born from war-but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.”

It takes a while for readers to realise the note on which this book ends. All of us understand how survival, an integral part of the narrative is dealt with, in the novel. *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* traces the lives of three generations impacted by a war in Vietnam. But in doing so, Vuong tries to maintain a voice that is personal, disintegrating into memories at times, and at times, infuses hope without sounding deliberate.

Published on 04 June 2019, the words take us to different years, briefly letting us know how narrator’s family reaches United States of America, and reveals minute details about his life in the country. This is an epistolary novel, the letters of a son to his mother who doesn’t know English. While addressing these letters to his mother, he also believes that she might never read them. Thus, inadvertently, rendering him a safe space to talk about motherhood, motherland, mother tongue, sexuality, past and a spectrum of violence, things that are part of life, but don’t make it to our everyday conversations. The implication of the letters is precisely the silence that surrounds the past, the survival of a family.

There are no accusations in the text. It however, opens a discussion about being misunderstood in the context of where one belongs in terms of nationality, language and gender. As the narrator’s mother doesn’t understand English, just

like everyone in the narrator's family grapples with the needs of living in a new country and the narrator's struggle with loss, abuse and homosexuality.

“Because I am your son, what I know of work I know equally of loss. And what I know of both I know of your hands.” What the narrator makes clear from the first paragraph of the book is that even if there is bravery in coming to terms with a notion of life that means financial strain, it takes its toll on a person, it changes them as parents. Parents who fail to understand that their war is different from that of their children.

There is a question raised by the author throughout the book. How do we let Art save us when the language in which we talk about, changes frequently, and not always for good? How do we now begin to talk about art in a way that does not take away from its healing attributes? An example given in the text itself is using the term “killing it” when someone is doing well at a form of art.

The narrative is crafted out of little things; there are intricate yet tiny details that have stayed with the narrator, which we are informed about at a crucial moment in the book. For example, Lan's Purple feet while dying remind the narrator about the Purple flowers that had fascinated Lan one day while walking back home from work. There is no clarity as to how important an event is to the narrator, what we see is its relation to the situation as it is being told to us now.

“Monkeys, moose, cows, dogs, butterflies, buffaloes. What we would give to have the ruined lives of animals tell a human story-when our lives are in themselves the story of animals”. How does one deal with a profoundly real aspect of History through fiction? Vuong presents to the readers atrocities against the animals, their tendencies and their vulnerability in the face of nature. Buffaloes follow their ancestors, even if it means death, butterflies migrate and it takes a lot of time before someone from them manages to come back to the homeland, all of these, and a haunting description of the experiments done on monkeys by those in power, create an imagery that is beautiful and disturbing at the same time. There is something terse about blatant description of animal brutality in a book that tries to tie survival to beauty without romanticising grief; however the readers also realise that this wouldn't be possible without clarity about just how difficult survival was for all those who weren't in power.

The conflict of every character in the book is that of homelessness within a home, what the readers notice is that over a period of time there is a hardening towards violence. Lan is used to the bullets in her backyard, the narrator is used to the cruelties of his mother brought about by her exhaustion, women are used to violence just like a war-torn country gets used to death and formulates its own way of dealing with it.

Vuong does not implicate anyone in the story, what comes about is a narrative that focuses on the life of those on the fringes of the white community in USA. The reader might say that the story isn't tightly packed, but the reason for the abrupt nature of narration is insecurity, the uncertainty that those away from home have to deal with a country like USA.

Set in New York, the book is filled with the experiences of a boy from Vietnam as he struggles with both his identity as well as sexuality. Even as everyone interprets a work of literature in their own way, I see a sense of urgency in the tone often taken by the author. There is an attempt to establish that all those living in one house maybe dealing with more than one hierarchy in a neighborhood, a city, a country. What is unsettling is the impact of the perceptions of those around on the narrator and his family, the lack of acceptance for anything that looks different from the rest is exhausting, and attacks the spirit of those who are already suffering from financial disparity as well as violence within a household.