BAŞKENT ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANA BİLİM DALI
AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI
TEZLİ YÜKSEK LİSANS PROGRAMI

TRAUMA AND POTENTIAL HEALING IN LAN CAO'S *MONKEY BRIDGE* AND *THE LOTUS AND THE STORM*

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ANKARA-2021

BAŞKENT ÜNİVERSİTESİ

SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ

YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZ ÇALIŞMASI ORİJİNALLİK RAPORU

Tarih: 13 / 12 / 2021

Öğrencinin Adı, Soyadı: Özgür Atmaca

Öğrencinin Numarası: 21910257

Anabilim Dalı: Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı

Programı: Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Tezli Yüksek Lisans Programı

Danışmanın Unvanı/Adı, Soyadı: Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Defne Tutan

Tez Başlığı: Trauma and Potential Healing in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and The Storm*

Yukarıda başlığı belirtilen Yüksek Lisans tez çalışmamın; Giriş, Ana Bölümler ve Sonuç Bölümünden oluşan, toplam 97 sayfalık kısmına ilişkin, 13 / 12 / 2021 tarihinde şahsım/tez danışmanım tarafından Turnitin adlı intihal tespit programından aşağıda belirtilen filtrelemeler uygulanarak alınmış olan orijinallik raporuna göre, tezimin benzerlik oranı % 3'tür. Uygulanan filtrelemeler:

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Tarih: 13 / 12 / 2021

Öğrenci Danışmanı Unvan, Ad, Soyad, İmza:

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Defne Tutan

For my beloved wife Deniz Göksu Atmaca who was with me right to the end.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I am grateful to my distinguished advisor Assist. Prof. Dr. Defne Tutan for her support, trust and constructive feedbacks which motivated me to complete this thesis. I also appreciate the kindness of the jury members Assist. Prof. Dr. Selen Aktari and Assist. Prof. Dr. Merve Özman.

I am greatly indebted to my parents Türkan Atmaca and Selami Atmaca and my sisters Bahar Atmaca and Yağmur Atmaca İldeniz who have never hesitated showing their endless affection to me.

I owe great thanks to my friends Ömer Baran Adıgüzel and Kaan Dewan for their invaluable comments and proof readings and all the other friends for their support.

My thanks also go to my friend Ecen Lale Nur Dülger together with whom I started this journey and I finished it with great joy. I strongly believe that our friendship will get stronger with new adventures in the academia.

My deepest gratitude belongs to my beloved wife Deniz Göksu Atmaca whose endless love and support helped me to keep this journey in perspective. My bluest sky and my sea of love, without your encouragement, motivation and warmth, I would not have completed this journey successfully. I could not love you more.

ÖZET

Özgür Atmaca, Trauma and Potential Healing in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*, Başkent Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Tezli Yüksek Lisans Programı, 2021.

Vietnam Savaşı, bitiminden yaklaşık yarım yüzyıl sonra, savaşa müdahil olan ulusların ve vahşete maruz kalan insanların hafızalarında hâlâ güçlü bir yer tutmaya devam etmektedir. Ancak, savaşın etkilerine ilişkin tartışmalar, Vietnamlıların deneyimlerini sürekli göz ardı etmiş ve ABD merkezli bir bakış açısı etrafında şekillenmiştir. Ana akım Amerikan kültür ürünleri, Amerikan gazilerinin deneyiminin ön plana çıkmasında ve dolayısıyla Vietnamlıların Savaşa dair seslerinin silinmesinde etkili bir role sahiptir. Bu haliyle, Vietnamlı Amerikan edebiyatı, Vietnam Savaşı hakkındaki egemen Amerikan söylemine bir yanıt olarak ortaya çıkmış ve göç sonrasında ABD'de marjinalleştirilen Vietnamlıların deneyimlerini odağına almıştır. Vietnam'da doğup savaş nedeniyle erken yaşta ABD'ye göç eden insanları tanımlamak için kullanılan bir terim olan 1.5 kuşak Vietnamlı gruba mensup olan Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge* (1997) ve *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014) adlı romanlarında savaşın hayatta kalan Vietnamlılar üzerindeki etkisine değinmektedir. Her iki roman da, geçmişteki travmatik olayların, bireylerin şimdiki hayatları üzerindeki sonuçlarını, bireylerin farklı deneyimlerine, karakter özelliklerine, inançlarına ve içinde bulundukları koşullara bağlı kalarak farklı semptomlarla göstermektedir. Cao'nun romanları, savaşın, bireysel travmaların yanı sıra, kolektif olarak yaşanan ve kolektif travmaya yol açan bir olgu olduğunu da vurgular. Bireysel ve kolektif travmalara neden olan şiddete rağmen, Cao, karakterlerini sürekli patolojik durumda olan çaresiz kurbanlar olarak değil, travmalarını geride bırakıp iyileşmek için mücadele veren kişiler olarak tasvir eder. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma iki romanda travmanın bireysel ve kolektif temsillerini ve her iki düzlemde yürütülen iyileşme çabalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, Vietnam Savaşı'ndan sağ kurtulanların travmasını ve iyileşme çabalarını daha iyi anlamak için, hem travmanın bireylerin psikeleri üzerindeki etkilerine odaklanan geleneksel travma teorilerinden, hem de aynı olaya dair farklı deneyimlerin olabileceğine ve travmanın yaşandığı bağlamların önemini vurgulayan ve kişilerin iyileşmek için farklı yollara başvurduğunu savunan çoğulcu yaklaşımlardan faydalanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Lan Cao, Travma, İyileşme, Vietnam Savaşı, Vietnamlı Amerikalı

ABSTRACT

Özgür Atmaca, Trauma and Potential Healing in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*, Başkent Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Tezli Yüksek Lisans Programı, 2021.

Nearly half a century since its end, the Vietnam War still continues to hold a strong place in the memories of the nations involved and of people who were subjected to the atrocities. However, debates on the effects of the War have always revolved around a U.S.-centered perspective excluding the Vietnamese experience. Mainstream American cultural productions have an influential role in foregrounding the American veterans' experience and thus erasing the Vietnamese voice related to the War. As such, Vietnamese American literature appears as a response to the dominant American discourse on the Vietnam War and concentrates on the experiences of the Vietnamese who have been marginalized in the U.S. after immigration. Being a 1.5 generation Vietnamese, a term used to describe the people who were born in Vietnam and moved to the U.S. at an early age due to the War, Lan Cao places emphasis on the impact of the War on the Vietnamese war survivors in her novels, *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014). Both novels demonstrate the consequences of traumatic past events in the present lives of the individuals through multiple symptoms depending on their distinct experiences, character traits, beliefs and present condition. Besides individual traumas, Cao's novels attach importance to the impact of the War as a collectively experienced phenomenon leading to collective trauma. Despite the violence causing individual and collective traumas, Cao does not portray the Vietnamese as helpless victims constantly in a pathological state, rather, they are depicted as trauma survivors who struggle to recover. Hence, this study aims to explore the representations of trauma at individual and collective levels and the efforts carried out at both levels for potential healing in the two novels. To better understand the trauma of the Vietnamese war survivors and their healing efforts, this study utilizes both traditional models of trauma theory that focus on the effects of trauma on the individual psyche and pluralistic approaches to trauma that highlight the importance of distinct experiences and contexts in which these experiences are situated and diverse paths taken by individuals for potential healing.

Keywords: Lan Cao, Trauma, Healing, Vietnam War, Vietnamese American

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore the representations of Vietnam War trauma on the Vietnamese Americans at individual and collective levels, and the various paths taken by the fictional characters for their potential healing in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014). Due to the multiplicity of responses given by the characters in the face of war trauma and their struggles for healing, a variety of trauma theories will be applied to each of the novels in order to better understand these diverse responses. Trauma studies is a broad field that encompasses different theories and discussions, sometimes clashing or overlapping with one another. In this regard, trauma studies is grouped under two main branches: the traditional and the pluralistic. The traditional understanding considers trauma as an event-based phenomenon, delayed impact of which occurs on the victim, in dissociative forms such as repetitive behaviors, fixations, flashbacks and intrusions. The individual-oriented and event-based traditional models of trauma studies enable this thesis to analyze the traumatic memories of the victims through concepts such as repression, dissociation and fixation. This model specifically focuses on the very personal experiences of the War. However, the pluralistic approaches to trauma pave the way for exploring individual and collective meanings attached to these experiences which sometimes increase and at other times ease the burdens of the victims. In that respect, not only the subjective interpretations of traumatic experiences but also the cultural and historical contexts in which these experiences are situated will be under close scrutiny in this thesis. As part of Vietnamese American literature, the two novels by Cao portray the effects of the Vietnam War on the marginalized, non-Western individuals and communities rather than depicting the War from an American-centered perspective which excludes these voices. By placing the focus on the analysis of the trauma experienced by Vietnamese Americans, this thesis also aims to contribute to the shift of perspective from Western-centered approaches to the Vietnam War trauma experienced by returning American soldiers.

More than forty years since its ending, the Vietnam War still maintains its important place in political and cultural discussions around the world. These discussions have generally revolved around the American experience of the War which resulted in great catastrophes. The impact of the War has an elemental effect on not only the American collective memory

but also on other western nations for whom the word "Vietnam" brings to mind the memories of the War rather than Vietnam as a country. Hoa Hong Pham (2016) expresses that "'Vietnam' is used as a one-word descriptor in American discourse to refer to military interventions overseas. It is also associated with the failure of such interventions" (p. 2). However, despite the fact that the U.S. is widely considered as the defeated side in the War, the discussions and representations of the War are dominated not by the Vietnamese but by the Americans. In order to express the ironic position of the U.S. as the defeated party in the War whose narrative has dominated its representations, Renny Cristopher (1995) states that it is a general assumption that history is written by the victors and "the losers live with it" but in the case of the Vietnam War, the Americans who are thought to have lost the war are "writing the history of the war" (p. 2). In that respect, the United States has paid no attention to any records of the War other than its own. This attitude of ignorance has also been displayed towards the narratives by South Vietnamese individuals who were considered Americans' allies and, thus, the natural losers in the War (p. 2). The U.S.-centered perspective, even from critical points of view, holds a "depoliticized representation" of the War without mentioning the causes and resulting effects on the North and South Vietnamese communities by placing the focus on the returning soldiers' "private experience" (p. 2). As Cristopher states,

> The United States lost the shooting war, but so far it is winning this meta-war. U.S. discourse about the war seems most comfortable when it can center exclusively on American issues and abstract 'Vietnam' the war from Viet Nam the country, or when it can discuss the war solely as a U.S. political conflict, rather than as a political and shooting war in the country of Viet Nam. (pp. 4-5)

As such, by means of the discussions of the War that exclude Vietnamese voices, the experiences of the Vietnamese people have been neglected and erased from the dominant American discourse about the War.

The 20th century literary and cinematic depictions of the War and its effects have also contributed to the U.S.-centered perspective. On the one hand, films like *Rambo: First Blood* assign Vietnamese people to 'subhuman' positions in order to claim the legitimacy of the War against them. On the other hand, there are productions such as *Apocalypse Now*, or *Full Metal Jacket* asserting critical attitudes towards the War. However, according to Jade Tiffany Hidle (2014), while these narratives of the War are mainly about reflecting or easing a sense of guilt, they are "far away from being about the experiences of Vietnamese people, rather than that they are mainly Americans' own experience in Vietnam War" (p. 2). In

general, Hollywood depictions of the Vietnamese as primitive or savages dispersed in the jungles of Vietnam and claiming the lives of American soldiers is an effective way of suppressing the Vietnamese voice. In Hidle's words "these U.S.-centric 'war is hell' filmic narratives foreground the painful experience of the American Vietnam veteran in such a way that the Vietnamese people, both civilians and veterans, are forgotten" (p. 7). By depicting the War from a militaristic American perspective and excluding the voices of the victims, especially the civilian narratives, the Hollywood film industry becomes very instrumental for American politics in asserting the legitimacy of the War.

Besides the film industry, in American literature, a number of novels on the Vietnam War gained popularity after the 1980s and the 1990s as the veterans returning to the U.S. began to write about their experiences (Ha, 2016, p. 468). As these texts are from the perspectives of American soldier authors, they are also one dimensional in that they do not include the experiences of the Vietnamese. Since the soldiers were the close witnesses of the War, their records have been considered as the true representations of the War. Soldier authors' narratives are about their personal disillusion and trauma stemming from the atrocities they experienced. Thus, American literature about the Vietnam War often portrays the soldiers "mourning the glorious, ennobling, and morally satisfying experience they expected" (Rentschler, 2016, p. 18). This theme of disappointment and war trauma of the American soldiers constitutes the main subject of later works in Vietnam War literature. While the early narratives are about the soldiers' experiences of the War, later ones are about the struggle for recovery from the suffering at individual and national levels. In Erin Marie Rentschler's words (2016) "American literature of the Vietnam War generally remains within the bounds of a United States' master narrative, focusing on the American experience of the war rather than extending outward to the others who experienced the same war" (p. xix). This exclusion includes not only the North Vietnamese as the enemy but also the South Vietnamese who were assumed to be allies of the U.S. In her article in *The New Yok Times*, Lan Cao (2018) states that the main concern of the notable novels such as *The Things They Carried* or *Fields of Fire* is to depict the transformation of American soldiers in the face of the War; as well as ignoring the Vietnamese civilians, they do not even give voice to the allied South Vietnamese soldiers as they were regarded useless (para. 8). Consequently, the sufferings of the Vietnamese are not mentioned in American literature, and the excuse for this absence is grounded in the idea that "the U.S. authors do not have sufficient knowledge of the Vietnamese to feel comfortable in characterizing them" because, during the war,

"there was hardly any close contact between the Americans and the Vietnamese" (Ha, 2016, p. 498). Hence, mainstream American literature associates 'Vietnam' just with the War and the sufferings of the soldiers rather than portraying it as a nation with its deep-rooted history and culture the population of which also suffered and was dispersed during and after the War. Few writers who portray Vietnam as a country and the Vietnamese as the real sufferers have not been paid enough attention. In that respect Philip H. Melling (1990) states that

> [i]n our discussion of the Vietnam War, those who write about the Vietnamese people are often relegated to the periphery. In criticism we continue to regard the Vietnamese as second-class citizens, culturally impoverished, socially unimportant, and aesthetically dull. Their presence has yet to fire the imagination of those of us who bring to Vietnam much of the cultural baggage—and the cultural prejudices—of a vast colonial undertaking. (p. 5)

Thus, it is clear that American political and cultural narratives are devoid of the experiences of the Vietnamese people. In addition, the War is considered as an event that victimized only the American soldiers whose psychological disturbance became the main concern of trauma studies in the 1980s and was reflected in the literature of that period and afterwards. However, although the narratives of the Vietnamese people have not been located in popular fictional and non-fictional American productions, their voice and trauma can be traced in the works written by Vietnamese and Vietnamese American writers.

Vietnamese American literature emerged as a result of Vietnamese migration to the U.S. after the Vietnam War. This literature can be considered a response to "inquiries about the identity stemming from U.S.-centric, myopic, and racialized narratives about the U.S.-Viet Nam War" that serves just to alleviate the remaining American guilt (Hidle, 2014, p. x). Consequently, the aim of this literature is to provide a voice for the Vietnamese American perspective on the War. In that respect, it revolves around the memories of a marginalized group whose experiences were ignored or left to be forgotten by mainstream American cultural productions.

As the narratives of the Vietnamese American veterans or civilians are outside the discourse of the official framework, they can be considered narratives of 'counter memory' a term used to describe the memories outside the "official historical framework" (Pham, 2016, p. 3). To emphasize the importance of the counter-memories, Hoa Hong Pham states that "counter memory challenges the notion of monolithic history and absolute truths. Counter memories provide a space in which the 'other' or 'minority' can be heard" (p. 2). According to Isabel T. Pelaud (2011), through these narratives which reflect the struggle and

insistence of those who are on the margin, "the society slowly includes those on the margins into the normative narrative" (p. 64). In that respect, literary works by Vietnamese American writers are becoming more visible, and they provide an opportunity to better understand the traumatic effects of the War on the marginalized *others*.

The Vietnamese immigrated to the U.S. in great numbers at the end of the Vietnam War when South Vietnam's capital Saigon was captured by the communist forces of North Vietnam. The people leaving Vietnam were so high in number that "their arrival represents the largest population movement to America since the immigration of Jews during and after World War II" (Pelaud, 2011, p. 8). Although there was a small number of Vietnamese people coming to the United States before the War, the term "Vietnamese American" refers especially to the refugees coming to the U.S. after "the Fall of Saigon" (p. 8). Because of the catastrophic events during the War and the exodus out of homeland, Vietnamese American literature predominantly revolves around the experiences of the War and of refugees in the U.S. According to Michele Janette (2003), one common factor in this literature is that it is "literature with a mission" which aims to teach Vietnamese culture, keep records of the past in relation to the Vietnam War and heal the wounds of the War (p. 269). As the depiction of the psychological effects of the War on Vietnamese people is one of the central elements of these narratives, Janette likens this literature to Coleridge's ancient mariner who tries to make others hear his story that includes traumatic experiences (p. 269). In another article about Vietnamese American literature, Janette (2018) further states that "it is an authorial perspective informed by being Vietnamese American in the United States, of sharing a history of the specific racialized violence resulting from the war in Vietnam and its aftermath" (p. 2) In other words, the traumatic impacts of the War, migration to the U.S. which resulted in the loss of homeland and the state of being refugees have a central effect on Vietnamese Americans and their literature. In its earlier periods, Vietnamese American literature emerged out of necessity to be recognized as the Vietnamese Americans wanted to reject stereotypical Vietnamese figures in mainstream productions. As Janette (2018) expresses, they offered "new perspectives on the war and were impressive in their generous assumptions that if mainstream Americans were informed of the fuller story, they would abandon their assumption that all Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans were enemy 'gooks'" (p. 9). Early works were generally written in the memoir genre and the political, national and cultural issues were intermingled with real personal experiences. However, later works were more about the accounts of suffering of civilian victims after the unification of

Vietnam as a result of the War. In this literature, Vietnam also turns out to be a place where not only military activities but also civilian life before, during and after the War is vividly depicted (Pelaud, 2011). Hence, rather than a single dimensional American viewpoint, an alternative and broader perspective is presented.

As Isabelle T. Pelaud states, today, works of Vietnamese American literature are produced by the '1.5 generation,' which is a term used to describe people born in Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S. at very early ages during or after the Vietnam War. In these texts, which are produced by literary professionals, the memories of Vietnam are combined with "discussions of racial and ethnic identity" in the U.S. (p. 36). Texts written by the '1.5 generation,' in that respect, are different from the texts written by the first generation who have left Vietnam in their older ages and whose works have a political stance towards causes, mistakes and results of the War using the "memoir genre" (Janette, 2003, p. 274). Narratives of the 1.5 generation are characterized by movement that goes back and forth between the U.S. and Vietnam, "either by actual travel there or by acts of memory, imagined or recollected" (Pelaud, p. 36). Therefore, memories of Vietnam are of great importance in these texts. The present is always considered and evaluated in relation to the past. As the War has traumatic effects on the lives of the individuals, such as the loss of loved ones and of the ancestral land, the impact of the past is utterly felt in the present. In this regard, Pelaud indicates "it is often described as haunting the lives of the narrators like ghosts, at times scary and at others comforting, driving both emotions and actions" (37). To emphasize the impact of the War on this literature in general, Jeffrey Tyler Gibbons (2016) states that

> these narratives of civilians, immigrants, and refugees disturb the reader and force the reader to consider the extensive, incessant, seemingly never-ending impact of war on multiple populations. Furthermore, these texts highlight the spectral legacy of the United States' wars in Asia and how the traumas inflicted upon multiple generations, across multiple continents echo into the present day. (p. 2)

As such, the continuous existence and extensive effects of the past in the memories, especially the atrocities not only on the soldiers but also on the civilians, demonstrate "the individual and collective traumas resulted by war" (Gibbons 59). Thus, representations of trauma in Vietnamese American literature becomes a matter of uttermost importance since it decentralizes the American perspective and makes it possible to explore the effects of the War from different lenses. For all these reasons, the rationale behind this thesis is to take these two novels as a microcosmic portrayal of the War and to understand how trauma

studies function as a mirror to the unspoken experiences of the marginalized and the ways in which these wounds are healed.

2. A Survivor Author, Lan Cao and Her Novels

Lan Cao, born in South Vietnam in 1961, is one of the 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans and a former Professor of International Economic Law at Chapman University. She has published two novels, *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014), and a joint memoir with her daughter Harlan Margaret van Cao, *Family in Six Tones* (2020), which concentrate on the issues of trauma, identity and refugee experiences in the U.S. Cao left Vietnam immediately before the fall of Saigon in 1975. With her family, she settled in Falls Church, Virginia. In the memoir *Family in Six Tones*, Cao expresses how the traumatic experiences of surviving a war and leaving Vietnam affected her individual identity and the other people at a collective level by stating that

> like others, I've carried my own and perhaps even my parents' bad memories, trauma, and grief, which have echoed in their lives and mine. We have tried to deflect but have also absorbed the past . . . Things that have happened to many of us in this generation have left their mark on each of us, although the same event can affect our individual brain pathways and our neurotransmitters differently. But pain is pain, whether it is remembered and felt as a dull ache or as a pang, and even if it's not visible to others, its vessels and capillaries are there in the body's hollow space. (p. 11)

Although she has spent most of her life in the U.S., Cao, similar to other 1.5 generation writers, still feels the pain of the loss of her ancestral land which is also a common feeling of the characters in her novels. For her, the state of leaving one's country because of reasons out of their control has long-lasting effects on individuals. The loss of "motherland" is an elemental part of her identity as she still defines herself as a "refugee who lost a country" (Cao & Cao, 2020, p. 1). Like other 1.5 generation writers, Cao does not define herself as completely Vietnamese or American both of which remain insufficient to define her hybrid identity as she states "at home I was all Vietnamese. In the world, with others, I was divided, hyphenated, fluctuating sometimes toward the Vietnamese and other times more toward the American side" (p. 20). For her, Vietnam means "culture and history" besides "war and loss" (p. 22) which still has a powerful force on her.

In the memoir, it is evident that, because of her traumatic experiences, Cao suffered from dissociative identity disorder which is another aspect of her life that she reflects in *The Lotus and the Storm*, since one of the main narrators exhibits the same symptoms. By surviving the War, Cao states that she was able to pass "the monkey bridge," "indigenous to

the Mekong Delta, with slender bamboo logs and hand rails" (p. 1). However, she did not make her crossing alone, as she states, she had "fellow travelers . . . the darker selves that emerge from the hidden, almost mystical shadows" (p. 2). Also, to express the impact of the events on herself, she states: "Sometimes our bodies and psyches become reluctant chroniclers of disturbance, spawning fractals of division, compartmentalized personalities, wounded souls, shadow selves, one could say, with distinct names like Cecile" (p. 11). It seems that this fractured self is projected onto Mai in *the Lotus and the Storm* who also names one of her multiple personalities Cecile. Cao's traumatic experiences and their reflections in her novels are important to understand the effects of these experiences on her. In her article about Tim O Brien's fictions that also reflect the author's trauma, Ruth A. H. Lahti (2012) states that

> in general, because the nature of traumatic experience as understood in trauma theory renders ideas of "truth" or "fact" problematic, survivors find fiction, with its more flexible, expressive links to the real, more appropriate than other traditional nonfiction forms of writing. Therefore, when survivors of certain traumatic experiences write fiction about similar experiences, there often remains a strong link between the fictional content and the author's past. (p. 3)

Lan Cao's memoir clearly indicates that she is a survivor author; witnessing atrocities of war caused her suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. For Cao, writing about the Vietnam War was not easy as it brought back the traumatic memories that she wanted to forget which is one of the characteristics of trauma victims who want to repress these memories. However, by writing about these experiences, she would overcome not just her fear about her repressed memories but also the "invisibility and erasure" (Cao & Cao, 2020, p. 216) of Vietnamese experience in American society. She also emphasizes the importance of writing fictions based on real life stories as, for her, they mean "remembering instead of forgetting. Drawing attention to the self and parading our experience instead of blending in inconspicuously. *Monkey Bridge* would tell our story, in fictional form . . . writing, even if only in fictional form, nudged me closer to my many selves in America" (p. 216). Hence, the parallelism between Cao's biography and her novels allows understanding of the trauma experienced by Vietnamese Americans.

Cao's first novel *Monkey Bridge* (1997) is mostly narrated by Mai who depicts the pre-war and wartime Vietnam and the present life in the U.S. Mai's narrative is sometimes interrupted by the narrative in her mother's diary which Mai discovers in the bedroom. Mai's retrospective narration includes her teenage years in Saigon, the hospital where she worked

as a volunteer during the War, her immigration to the U.S. with the help of her father's friend, and her present life with her mother Thanh in Virginia where she is preparing for college. Thanh leaves Vietnam after Mai but does not bring her father Baba Quan whose absence is a central impasse for Mai throughout the novel. Whenever she wants to solve the mystery of what happened to her grandfather by talking to Thanh, Mai is left unanswered by Thanh's evasions and silence. Thanh believes that there are karmic reasons behind the atrocities experienced in the past and blames herself for the sufferings of her family. For that reason, she is unwilling to talk about the past with her daughter but keeps writing about it. However, by reading the diary accounts written by her mother, Mai eventually discovers details about Thanh's experiences in Vietnam and by Thanh's suicide letter, the actual reasons why Baba Quan was left behind. Both Mai's narrative and Thanh's diary demonstrate that their minds always oscillate between the past and the present. In that respect, Şule Okuroğlu Özün (2019) states that "the main characters Mai and Thanh are psychologically and physically displaced and haunted by their traumatic memories. The Vietnam War, its traumatic memories, political and familial violence shape both Mai's and Thanh's past and present" (p. 294). As such, traumatic memories still impose themselves on both Mai and her mother in their present lives.

Similar to *Monkey Bridge*, Lan Cao's second novel *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014) also portrays the lives of Vietnamese war survivors immigrating to the U.S. The story is mainly narrated by two characters: Mai and her father Minh. Although the name of the protagonist is same as the one in the first novel, this character is a different person. This story also alternates between the present and the past. Mai describes pre-war times in the city of Cholon close to the city of Saigon when the war continues in rural areas of Vietnam. However, after a while, the city becomes a battleground, which brings destruction, displacement and the loss of family members. Similar to his daughter Mai, Minh's narrative is also preoccupied with his experiences as a high-ranking commander fighting in the battlefields and his efforts to protect his family. As the story fluctuates between the past and the present, it is clear that, like in the first novel, the experiences of war are not healed yet. Because of the War causing loss of family members, Minh suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and Mai suffers from dissociative identity disorder which leads her to have two other personalities called Bao and Cecile. Some chapters of the novel are narrated by Bao to give more information about Mai' s repressed feelings which are hidden from the reader and other characters in the former chapters. According to Jeffrey Tyler Gibbons (2016), Cao

utilizes these three narrators "to demonstrate both the disorienting nature of war's psychological trauma as well as the turbulence of a decades-long struggle towards healing the wounds of war" (64). Thus, through multiple narratives, the impact of the trauma on the characters' psyche is better understood.

It is evident that the central subject in the novels of Lan Cao is how the traumatic memories affect the present and their impact on the minds of the characters. Consequently, problematizing these texts on the basis of a psychoanalytic and cultural analysis of trauma will offer a space to argue how these characters are distressed by traumatic experiences and the ways in which they struggle to find a way to heal their wounds. In this regard, this thesis will utilize various trauma theories to explore the experiences of marginalized and silenced victims to offer a shift from the American-centered perspective of the War.

3. Theoretical Background

Today trauma studies is a broad field that includes a number of perspectives and discussions. Although there seems to be an agreement upon the definition of trauma as an overwhelming experience, some aspects of it, especially its impact on the individual memory, have remained open to discussion. Traditionally, prominent clinicians and theorists in the field have argued that traumatic events are experienced with "inherent forgetting" (Caruth, 1995, p. 8) and the victims remember these experiences later in their lives in intrusive forms which means these memories are not part of narrative or conscious memory. Sigmund Freud's studies on hysteria and his interpretations on the memories of hysterical patients have specifically reinforced the development of this idea. Prominent trauma scholars of the late 20th century such as Judith Herman, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Cathy Caruth have also supported the idea that victims forget or repress traumatic memories which appear later and disturb the daily lives of victims. The common ground of these scholars is their emphasis on the extraction of these disturbing memories onto the conscious level to heal the patients.

On the other hand, there are other scholars who argue that traumatic experiences are not forgotten even though the traumatized individuals wish to forget them. The vividness of these experiences continues to influence the lives of the victims not just through intrusive appearances but also through usual remembering. The most well-known theorist of this counter-argument is Richard McNally who, in his work *Trauma and Memory* (2003), criticizes Freud's and Van der Kolk's theories about the amnestic nature of traumatic

memories and presents detailed narratives of victims as his counter-argument. Apart from the discussions on the working principles of traumatic memory, another criticism comes from literary critics, like Michael Rothberg (2008), who emphasize the limitations in the discussions that revolve around the Euro-centric framework excluding the experiences of non-Western individuals in the colonial and postcolonial world. Michelle Balaev (2012) also contributes to the discussions of literary trauma studies with her emphasis on place, culture and historical context rather than the individual memory isolated from these elements. For her, these factors have great effects on the individual response to traumatic events. Therefore, it is obvious that the diversity of opinions on the nature of responses to traumatic events indicate that experiences of and responses to trauma can be analyzed from various multi-dimensional perspectives.

3. 1. Traditional model of trauma theory

Trauma is originally a Greek word meaning "wound" which refers to the "injury inflicted on a body," but the term was later used by scholars to describe the "wound" imposed on the mind rather than on the body (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Thus, rather than the physical impact, its psychological aspect has become the subject of study over the years. Depending on the context, the word trauma is sometimes used to describe the event that caused the pain but, in general, the emphasis is on the condition produced by the event (Özcan, 2018, p. 2). In order to differentiate the event from the condition produced by it, Kai Erikson (1995) employs the terms "traumatic experience" and "traumatic state" but uses "trauma" alone to describe the resulting condition rather than the event or experience (p. 286). According to Ruth Leys (2000), the underlying idea behind the concept of trauma is a "disorder of memory" which is induced by shock or surprise because of some unexpected situations (p. 2). The result is splitting and dissociation of the mind because of its inability to register the events into the normal workings of the memory since "awareness and cognition are destroyed" (p. 2). This inability to assimilate these experiences influences or haunts the victim by intruding recollections. In that respect, "the experience of trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present" (p. 2). Although today it is widely known that disastrous events can cause psychological problems for some people, modern studies on the effects of disasters on the mind began to appear in the second half of the 19th century (Leys, 2000). Earlier trauma studies focused more on the physical aspects of the damages on the brain and spine that were caused by accidents which led to distress. Nonetheless, later studies were

carried out to understand the psychological impacts. With these developments, the studies on hysteria also began to be the subject of serious investigation (Herman, 1992, p. 12). Consequently, "hysterical shattering of the personality consequent on a situation of extreme terror or fright" (Leys, 2000, p. 4) has become the focus of later trauma studies.

In the introductory chapter of *Studies on Histeria*, entitled "Preliminary Communication," Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer (1893) state that in most of the hysterical cases, simple interrogation of the patients to identify the source of the problem precipitating the pathologic symptoms is not efficient. This is sometimes because the patients are not willing to talk about the event. However, in general, the real reason is not their unwillingness to talk, but their inability to remember the traumatic event and their lack of awareness of the connection between that event and the resulting pathology (p. 3). For Freud and Breuer, in traumatic neuroses, victims generally suffer from long years of hysterical symptoms stemming from a single incident. The symptoms can vary in different forms such as immediate painful arising of emotions leading to frequent vomiting, developing tics, feeling sudden pain in parts of the body without external stimuli (p. 4). For all these reasons, Freud and Breuer conclude that "in traumatic neuroses the operative cause of the illness is not the trifling physical injury but the effect of fright- the psychical trauma;" the experiences which invoke painful emotions like "fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain" can cause traumatic neuroses depending on the vulnerability of the person subjected to these experiences (p. 6). Since the memories related to the traumatic incidents are not integrated into the normal memory mechanism, they act like "a foreign body which after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (p. 6). Unlike normal memories which tend to weaken over time, they continue to disturb the individual for a long period. In that respect, Freud and Bruer state that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (p. 7). To explain the reason for these long-lasting intrusions, they point out the factors that enable the non-traumatic memories to get integrated and later put into the wearing-away process. First of all, if there is an active and sufficient amount of reaction, be it voluntary or involuntary, to the situation that causes an affect such as "tears or acts of revenge," the "affects are discharged" and disappear in time (p. 8). However, if the person is not able to give a response or suppresses the reaction to the event, "the affect remains attached" to the memory in an unusual way (p. 8). Reaction does not need to be in a bodily or physical form; language can also take the place of these actions. As they state, through language, "an affect can be released or abreacted almost affectively. In other cases, speaking itself is the adequate reflex,

when, for instance, it is lamentation or giving utterance to a tormenting secret, e.g., a confession" (p. 8). Besides these reactions named as "abreaction" (p. 11), the other form of dealing with adverse situations is to associate these experiences with the previous or later memories to integrate them. Freud and Breur explain the process of associations:

> Traumatic experience comes alongside other experiences, which may contradict it, and is subjected to rectification by other ideas. After an accident, for instance, the memory of the danger and the (mitigated) repetition of the fright becomes associated with the memory of what happened afterwards — rescue and the consciousness of present safety. Again, a person's memory of a humiliation is corrected by his putting the facts right, by considering his own worth, etc. (p. 9)

As such, it is obvious that if the situation hinders verbal or physical reaction or becomes dissociated from other experiences, the reminiscences maintain their "affective tone." These experiences continue to haunt people although they are "absent from patients' memory when they are in a normal psychical state" because they are not under patients' control (p. 9). Therefore, the patient shows symptoms of a traumatized psyche and hysterical behavior.

In the early years of the 20th century, the interest in trauma studies lost its popularity; however, the traumatic experiences of soldiers in World War I paved the way for a revival of studies in this field. In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud claims that normally an individual's mental mechanism works under the principle of pleasure which keeps the flow of "quantity of excitation" in a low or stable level so any experience in which this balance is disrupted, this apparatus starts to disfunction and the experience becomes "unpleasurable" (p. 3). In order to explain the reasons for traumatic neuroses, Freud states that there is a "protective shield" or a barrier that works to protect the individuals against a large amount of stimuli and any breach in this barrier causes these stimuli to flow in. Because of that breach and the excessive amount of stimuli, the pleasure principle fails to function in order to protect the organism. "There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimuli" (p. 23). As a result, the problem arises because the mastery or integration of these stimuli becomes impossible as the person is unprepared and excessively frightened at the moment of the event. After this situation, the experience becomes repressed or forgotten; however, it imposes itself later through repetitive behaviors. Since the memory of the situation is not integrated into mental schemata, it becomes dissociated but continues to disturb the person. Even the dreams of traumatized patients do not serve for wish fulfilment under control of the pleasure principle. Therefore, patients are haunted by these unintegrated memories in the form of nightmares.

Thus, dreams become part of the "compulsive to repetition" (p. xiv) phenomenon which the victims demonstrate without being aware of it. As Freud states,

> the fulfilment of wishes is, as we know, brought about in a hallucinatory manner by dreams, and under the dominance of the pleasure principle this has become their function. But it is not in the service of that principle that the dreams of patients suffering from traumatic neuroses lead them back with such regularity to the situation in which the trauma occurred. (p. 23)

These dreams demonstrate that the person is fixated on the trauma, and through repetitive occurrences these dreams take the person back to the situation in order to master the experience retrospectively because the patient was caught unprepared and unable to do that at its first occurrence. In his article "Fixations to Traumas — The Unconscious," (1917) Freud elucidates this idea by stating that as the patients still have not reached closure on the traumatic experience, they "repeat these traumatic situations in their dreams" (p. 273). At the root of these repetitions lies the unconscious fixations. Therefore, the person repeats these obsessional behaviors without a conscious awareness and does not know their roots as the traumatic experiences are repressed or dissociated. The only way to end these obsessional behaviors is to bring the repressed or unconscious memories onto the conscious level (p. 278). Thus, at the core of Freud's treatment of a traumatic patient is the idea that, because of the nature of traumatic memories they are too difficult to be integrated into other memories.

Due to lack of integration, the part of the mental mechanism that holds traumatic memories is blocked from of the rest of the consciousness and these memories become repressed or dissociated. However, traumatized individuals become fixated on their traumas which appear through obsessional repetitive acts or in the form of nightmares. In order to treat traumatized patients, Freud (1920) offers hypnosis which enables the individual to go through a "process of reaction and associative correction" (p. 15). By this method, which necessitates a professional clinician, the disturbing ideas or experiences are extracted or, in his words, abreacted by talking to the patients. According to Freud, this "allows the strangulated affect to find a way out through speech" and subjects the idea first "to associative correction by introducing it into normal consciousness or remove it through physician's suggestion" (p. 17). Freud's ideas about repression, compulsive repetition, and therapeutic abreaction of repressed memories have greatly influenced later discussions on trauma studies.

Although studies on trauma were carried out by a number of psychologists during the later years of the 20th century, especially with the aim of explaining the shock and trauma experienced by soldiers in the two world wars, the official recognition was only made in

1980 when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) categorized it as a mental condition under the name of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Herman, 1992, p. 28). This official recognition was made possible through the actions of American veterans returning from the Vietnam War. The veterans formed a number of organizations called "rap groups" where they talked about their experiences of the War and its psychological effects on them. The aim of these groups was not only to relieve post-war distress but also to call attention to the effects of the War (Herman, p. 27). After the official recognition by APA, the number of studies in the field of trauma increased and, in the later years, these studies included war experiences of civilians such as Holocaust victims, and experiences of rape and domestic violence. The experiences of non-combat soldiers were also considered to have the same psychological impact for the survivors.

Drawing their theories on Freud's and his contemporary Pierre Janet's studies on trauma and hysteria, Judith Herman, van der Kolk and Cathy Caruth also highlight the concepts of repression and dissociation in the face of traumatic experiences which need to be remembered and mastered through therapeutic treatments. According to Judith Herman (1992), although the effects of trauma on different individuals can vary and there is no single dimension of it, certain experiences increase the possibility of harm; these are "being taken by surprise, trapped, or exposed to the point of exhaustion" (p. 33). When people face violent events or witness the death of somebody, it is highly possible that they become traumatized. In all these situations, the essential feature of such events is their potentiality to evoke "helplessness and terror" (p. 33). That is because these situations are over "the ordinary human adaptation" and they disrupt the sense of control (p. 33). Similar to Freud, Herman also underlines the importance of action in the face of traumatic incidents which enables the person to adapt into the situation. Emotions like fear and anger are also considered to have an adaptive role for a person. This also leads to the idea that, when emotional or bodily reactions are not displayed and escape is impossible, the natural human self-defense becomes "overwhelmed and disorganized" which causes these ordinary responses to remain in an "altered and exaggerated state long after the danger is over" (p. 34). Consequently, the traumatized person may show intense emotion without the memory of the event as these memories are dissociated. As such, although the traumatized constantly feel irritation or a persistent alertness, they do not know the reason behind these reactions. This feeling of alertness, which Herman calls "hyperarousal" (p. 35), does not only appear during the wake states but also continues to disturb the traumatized people when they are asleep.

With reference to the works of Pierre Janet and the concept of "dissociation," Herman explains that traumatic symptoms have an aptitude for becoming "disconnected from their source and take on life of their own" (p. 34). Dissociation makes traumatizing memories remain "in an abnormal state, set apart from ordinary consciousness" (p. 34). This is a typical response to traumatic events; they are set apart from other conscious material. However, these memories "refuse to be buried" and the memory of the traumatic event returns as a repetitive symptom rather than as a verbal narrative. Herman emphasizes the unspeakable nature of these memories because their extreme influence on the individual psyche makes them difficult to put into narration. Rather than verbal narration, the victims re-live the events in dissociative states. It is difficult to continue the normal course of life as the trauma continuously interrupts the present. "It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma" (p. 37). During the wake states, a situation associated with or a reminder of the past event evokes traumatic memories. These memories come in the form of flashbacks with "all the vividness and emotional force of the original event" (p. 37). For Herman, in order to recover, remembering, mourning and talking about the traumas are of great importance. In this way, trauma can be integrated into the survivor's life story like the normal memories (p. 176). Thus, having the knowledge of their condition and remembering the trauma has a crucial role for the patients' recovery as she states

> the patient may not have full recall of the traumatic history and may initially deny such a history, even with careful, direct questioning . . . if the therapist believes the patient is suffering from a traumatic syndrome, she should share this information fully with the patient. Knowledge is power. The traumatized person is often relieved simply to learn the true name of her condition. By ascertaining her diagnosis, she begins the process of mastery . . . She discovers that she is not crazy; the traumatic syndromes are normal human responses to extreme circumstances. And she discovers, finally, that she is not doomed to suffer this condition indefinitely; she can expect to recover, as others have recovered. (p. 158)

However, recognizing and remembering trauma are just the first steps on the way to recovery and gaining control of the self. Traumatic situations can have adverse effects on social relations because loss of loved ones can cause social isolation. Restoring connection with the social environment enables the victim to gain agency and self-confidence. Hence, besides having been influenced by Freud's theories on trauma, Judith Herman points to the importance of social connection for recovery which is also an important element considered in this thesis not only for individual recovery but also as a form of collective healing.

Influenced by the theories of Freud and especially of his contemporary Pierre Janet, psychologists Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart (1991) state that "people who possess a prior store of information about a particular area of knowledge tend to integrate new data related to that subject more easily than do people who have little or no prior knowledge" (p. 439) This means that experiences create schemes in the mental mechanism which make it possible to integrate new information. In van der Kolk's and van der Hart's words, "mind organizes the new information into the preexisting patterns" (p. 440). When the memory of an experience is impossible to integrate as it does not fit the previous patterns or schemes, it gets disconnected and dissociated from previous knowledge. As the traumatizing incident is an unexpected situation, the effect on the victim is "speechless terror" and fixation (p. 442). Hence, the experience is hard to be symbolized at the linguistic level which makes it appear as "somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares and flashbacks" (p. 442). van der Kolk and van der Hart explain the occurrence of these fixed ideas and repetitive phenomena by giving examples from studies carried out on animals. In these experiments, when the animals are put into severe stressful situations, some of the "memory tracks" get roused and the later similar stimuli get "preferentially" through the same tracks which trigger the old memories of the previous situation. Just like animals, when people find themselves in a situation similar to the traumatizing event or associate an object with it, similar pathways get activated and this hyperarousal causes reliving of the disturbing memories (p. 444). This reliving does not come in the form of remembering all the experience but it comes through feelings associated with these situations. Because of their amnestic and unintegrated nature, van der Kolk (1996) calls traumatic memories "non-declarative memory" (p. 280). In contrast to "declarative memories," which are part of conscious awareness, these memories have no "linguistic components;" they are displayed through bodily reflexes and emotional reactions. However, in the course of time, as people become more aware of their traumatic experiences, they can form narratives to describe the traumatic experience but that does not necessarily mean that these people do not suffer from the effects of trauma in their later years.

As the intrusive memories or bodily reenactments lose their effect, people become estranged from social life and emotionally detached as they are still attached to their past life. In that sense, van der Kolk and van der Hart (1991) state "they live . . . in two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life. Very often, it is impossible to bridge these worlds . . . the traumatic past and the bleached present" (p. 448). Consequently, even if the person is able to talk about or remember the trauma, that does not

mean full recovery or healing. In order to recover, therapists need to present the patient a different version of the event, such as imagining a flower, rather than disturbing images related to the traumatic scene or images which empower the victim against the perpetrator (p. 450). Hence, "uncovering memories is not enough; they need to be modified and transformed (i.e., placed in their proper context and reconstructed in a personally meaningful way)" (van der Kolk, 1996, p. 19). Rather than a mechanism of recording the event, memory needs "to become an act of creation rather than the static recording of events . . . Like memories of ordinary events, the memory of the trauma needs to become merely a (often distorted) part of the patient's personal past" (p. 19). In that sense, van der Kolk argues that for recovery, remembering is not enough but transformation or sometimes falsifying of real experiences in order to make the victim feel strong is important.

The traditional view of trauma is also shared by the literary critic Cathy Caruth who, in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1995), states that "trauma stands outside representation altogether" (p. 17). This is because "it is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly" to be perceived, so it remains at the unconscious level before it starts to trouble the person again "in the nightmares and repetitive actions" (3) Caruth asserts that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance" (p. 4). "The historical power of trauma," Caruth writes, "is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (1995, p. 8). Caruth considers this inherent forgetting or delay for the experience as a way of carrying the victim "beyond the shock of the first moment" (1995, p. 10). Consequently, trauma is not about the original precipitating event but its belated impact on the victim.

For Caruth, "the story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (p. 8). According to Ruth Leys (2000), Caruth's model of trauma, characterized by its belated nature, is similar to "the model of an infectious disease, in which an incubation period or period of delay intervenes between the initial infection and the subsequent appearance of symptoms" (p. 271). This metaphor suggests that trauma can infect or be transmitted to others. As Caruth points out (1996), trauma "is never simply one's own . . . we are implicated in each other's traumas" (p. 24). Because of this feature of trauma, it gains a transgenerational dimension which means that later generations of an ethnic or cultural group continue to suffer from the trauma as an ethnic

heritage. In that respect, Michelle Balaev (2012) states that "this supports the claim that narratives can re-create and abreact the traumatic experience for those who were not there—the reader, listener, or witness can experience the historical trauma firsthand" (p. 13). In short, because of the extremity of the event, which makes it hard for the individual's capacity to comprehend, trauma is unspeakable and cannot be represented or symbolized at the linguistic level but has the potentiality to influence the individual and others.

3. 2. Alternative approaches to trauma

Although the abovementioned traditional theories on trauma were an outcome of long years of clinical studies and focused on the amnestic, thus the unspeakable, nature of trauma, they have been followed by a number of alternative models. While some of these reactionary models focus on the process of traumatic memory, others emphasize the diverse forms of trauma and go beyond traditional event-based explanations. According to Michelle Balaev (2014) "these contemporary approaches are wide ranging but could be generally referenced under the umbrella term of the pluralistic model of trauma due to the plurality of theories and approaches employed" (p. 3). In a similar fashion, this thesis does not regard the contemporary theories as a collection of individual counter-arguments, since such a perspective would limit their potential, but as various arguments which bring different layers to the understanding of trauma.

An important challenge to the traditional approach towards trauma as inherently forgotten, thus hidden from even the victim, comes from Richard McNally. He defines trauma as "objective attributes of the stressor, by the subjective response of the victim, or both" (2003, p. 79). McNally (2005) rejects the claim that traumatic memories are inherently repressed or forgotten; on the contrary, he argues that in most of the cases, these memories are not forgotten and people are more likely to remember them even when they wish to forget because intense arousal and the release of hormones during traumatic events strengthen the memory of the traumatizing experience (p. 819). In his book *Remembering Trauma* (2003), which is regarded by Chris R. Brewin (2005) as the "sceptics' Bible" (p. 148), McNally points out the great number of experiments carried out on animals and people which do not correspond to the traumatic amnesia theories. He (2003) accepts that the traumatic experiences can appear in the form of flashbacks, intrusions or through nightmares that the traumatized person may feel that they are reliving the experience again. However,

interpreting these reenactments as the only symbolic evidence of forgotten memories which come just through reexperience is wrong because people remember the origins of their traumas very well.

In the traditional model, flashbacks are regarded as literal restatements of the events that are forgotten. However, McNally rejects that, as they also "contain distortion of what happened during the trauma" and they also "occur even among the people who did not actually witness the traumatic event" (p. 116). In the classical view of trauma, the reenactments, dreams or intrusions were considered "the exact re-livings or replicas of the original event or situation" (Leys, 2002, p. 233) as they are protected from the wearing away process in a dissociated form. Nonetheless, McNally states that the human brain does not work like a "videotape recorder where traumatic memories remain invariable for a long time," and their recollection involves reconstruction (p. 117). Thus, in contrast to van der Kolk's and van der Hart's ideas, McNally argues that trauma does not hinder the mental mechanism to integrate the memory of the traumatizing event into declarative memory. For example, Holocaust survivors are able to give detailed accounts of atrocities they faced in the camps (p. 180). For McNally, some traumatized people might choose not to talk about their traumas or try to dispel the memories of atrocities but this "must not be confused with success at doing it" because these attempts are bound to fail as they "increase trauma-related thoughts" (p. 152). Hence, for McNally, traumatizing memories are not frozen in time and they do not appear just through bodily expressions or reenactments but these re-livings are also accompanied by narrative memory.

Laurence J. Kirmayer emphasizes (1996) the difference between childhood abuse trauma and the accounts of Holocaust survivors. For Kirmayer, these two kinds of trauma differ from each other with respect to the issues of remembering and forgetting. While for a childhood trauma victim, the brutality of the event makes it hard to remember; for Holocaust survivors, it is hard to forget the violence. Kirmayer argues that, although in both of the instances the symptoms can be explained as outcomes of trauma,

> for the Holocaust survivor, the reaction is one of being overwhelmed and then responding by numbing, detachment, or suppression so that one's story sits forever at the edges of consciousness to be worked around or told in fragments. For the survivor of childhood abuse, the response to overwhelming trauma is a form of mental escape by resolute partition of memory, self, and experience. There is no narrative of trauma then, no memory—only speaking in signs. (p. 230)

In that respect, Kirmayer explains the traumatic memories of childhood abuse victims from a traditional perspective as he assumes that these memories are dissociated from ordinary

memories. Because of the intensity of the pain or shock, these memories are more deeply ingrained than the usual ones but continue to haunt the victim through bodily aspects rather than verbal narrative. Furthermore, the extremity of emotion experienced during the event causes the persistence and intrusions of the memories into everyday life as typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (p. 234). Although childhood trauma survivors suffer from severe forms of dissociation, Kirmayer describes the state of Holocaust survivors as "suffering from painful recollections, anxiety, or numbing and emotional disconnection" (p. 240). Rather than traumatic amnesia, what characterizes their trauma is the feelings such as "guilt, rage, despair" and the extremity of psychological suffering that is hard to describe through words (p. 241). Thus, this difficulty to describe the unbearable feelings and the desire to forget the experience leads the Holocaust survivors to not speak about their traumas and stay silent which renders them symptomatic. Consequently, Kirmayer underlines the therapeutic effect of talking about trauma to break this silence in order to recover.

However, rather than an individual act, telling as part of collective action is more meaningful for the atrocities experienced collectively. This collective act opens a public space for talking about individual and collective traumas. In Kirmayer's words, "if a community agrees traumatic events occurred and weaves this fact into its identity, then collective memory survives and individual memory can find a place (albeit transformed) within that landscape" (p. 247). When remembering is regarded as an unbearable burden for the traumatized person and the community, it is "sequestered in a virtual (mental) space" which becomes isolated and disconnected (p. 246). This is the result of the belief that telling is impossible. If the survivors' experiences are not recognized or accepted by the community, they are no longer a part of collective memory and the individuals continue to suffer in silence. "As remembering is a social act, so too is forgetting" (p. 249). That distinguishes Kirmayer's theory from the former theories on trauma as he emphasizes the role of the community and the social context for the integration and remembrance of traumatic experiences or their disposal. Trauma as a social and collective experience will also be focus in later discussions.

Drawing on Kirmayer's theories on the social and cultural aspects of traumatic experience, Michelle Balaev (2012) offers a pluralistic model of trauma which "emphasizes multiplicity of responses to an extreme experience and the importance of contextual factors in determining the significance of the event" (p. xi). In order to explain this model, she focuses on American trauma novels since literature has an important role in conveying various representations of trauma by emphasizing the contextual factors and places where

extreme experience occur (p. xi). Rather than the traditional approaches which explain the dominant reaction to trauma as a pathological splitting of consciousness resulting from extreme terror, the pluralistic model stresses remembering influenced by "multiple internal and external factors such as individual personality traits, family history, culture, geographic location, place and historical period that shape the meaning of the experience" (p. xix). This perspective demonstrates how interpretation of certain events is affected by the cultural and historical contexts. Thus, the evaluation of experiences or the value given to them is not only bound to individual reaction isolated from the social and cultural environment. An event can be accepted as traumatic in a certain cultural or historical moment but may not be considered in this way in another time or context. In that respect, Balaev states that

> if remembering a traumatic experience is conceived as an imaginative process of recollection, a process consistently in creation and shaped as much by social narrative as by individual character traits, in order to understand trauma, attention must be given to contextual factors that influence both the experience and act of remembering. (p. xiv)

Hence, not only the past context in which the trauma was experienced but also the future context in which trauma is remembered influence the interpretation of trauma over time. Trauma is not regarded as an essentially "wordless event that creates an unknowable memory or mental illness" (p. xiv). Since remembering implies the reconstruction of memories in accordance with the context, trauma does not mean literal recollection of events as the conditions change the ways of remembering. This means remembering is open to alterations over time.

Similar to Balaev's emphasis on the contextual and cultural differences that affect the impact of trauma, other literary and cultural critics also emphasize how the traditional trauma theories are centered around "the Euro-American conceptual and historical framework" (Visser, 2015, p. 251). The traditional studies in the field are criticized for revolving around the traumatic experiences of "white Westerners and solely [employing] critical methodologies emanating from a Euro-American context" (Craps & Buelens, 2008, p. 2). This single dimensional attitude in the field is considered to have a negative effect on the understanding of trauma and the cooperation between different societies and cultures as they disregard or marginalize "non-Western traumatic events and histories, and non-Western theoretical work" (p. 2) perpetuating the breach between the West and the other countries. In that respect, Michael Rothberg (2008) states that the current theoretical framework does not provide "the best framework for thinking about the legacies of violence in the colonized/postcolonial world" (p. 226). Thus, an awareness of the experiences in the rest of

the world is needed and also consideration of the cultural or personal diversity for reception and handling trauma should be emphasized. In that respect, postcolonial novels are considered to exhibit the various forms of traumatic experiences stemming from "racial inequality, colonial violence or intergenerational transmission of trauma" or other forms (p. 226). According to Ana Miller (2008), an example for this plurality of responses is given by Achmat Dango whose novel *Bitter Fruit*

> problematizes the ability of homogenizing accounts of trauma to account for the specificity and heterogeneity of experiences of, and responses to, trauma. It suggests the need to contextualize trauma, to examine each experience as it is embedded in a particular historical, geographic, social, cultural, and personal history. In doing this, it suggests the limits of theoretical models in describing and explaining trauma: individual experiences will never quite fit attempts to place them within a model, particularly when the model is restricted. (p. 159)

Therefore, similar literary works that display various forms of trauma outside the traditional Euro-American-centric model also call for a paradigm change in trauma studies towards a more general perspective. This is also a call for "decolonizing trauma studies" by providing an "alternative canon" in the field (Rothberg, 2008, p 226). Decolonization does not mean that the subjects of trauma studies must solely be the people outside the colonizing countries. On the contrary, Rothberg emphasizes the internal heterogeneity of these countries. Attention must also be given to "parallels and differences between forms of violence inside and outside the metropole" (p. 228). As such, decolonization of trauma does not necessarily mean a geographical shift from Western nations as they are also locations of traumatizing situations and hegemonic relations that minority groups suffer from.

In parallel with Rothberg's approach to the heterogeneity of experiences that are ignored by the dominant model of trauma, Laura S. Brown points out (1995) various forms of traumatic experiences of disempowered people in society which are excluded by event-based trauma theory because, according to this theory, trauma is an experience of an event which is "outside the range of human experience" (p. 100). According to this critical view, since the traditional definition of trauma is formed considering dominant groups, it does not include the traumas of women, lower class people, LGBTs, people with disabilities or people of color whose continuous oppression by the dominant groups is not actually outside the range of human experience. Thus, the range of human experience "becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of dominant class; white, young, able bodied, educated, middle class, Christian man" (Brown, p, 101). As such, Brown draws attention to the need to broaden the concept of trauma from event-based unexpected or unusual phenomenon "that happen to people in socially dominant positions" (Crabs & Buelens, 2008,

p. 3) to "insidious trauma," which refers to "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (Brown, 1995, p. 107). As an example of insidious trauma, Brown cites the situation of her working class and disabled patient. The patient is exposed to verbal and emotional abuse in the workplace and gets humiliated by healthcare providers. Because of the physical pain, nightmares and the emotional burden that the woman feels, Brown states that "I see this woman as traumatized; she has all of the symptoms of a trauma victim when she first walks into my office" (p. 104). Hence, for Brown, different forms of insidious trauma are experienced by non-dominant groups in the society but, as their voices are suppressed, mainstream theories tend to ignore these experiences. Therefore, the focus on the marginalized and disempowered groups inside and outside the Euro-American society can be of help to broaden the understanding of trauma.

3. 3. Trauma as a collective experience

The emphasis on the social, cultural context and insidious trauma experienced by marginalized groups foregrounds the collective experience rather than the individual-oriented trauma perspective. The traditional trauma theory focuses just on the individual psychology which, according to Craps and Buelens (2008), presents a limited understanding of the collective experience. These "individualizing and thus depoliticizing tendencies" enforce the assumption that "recovery from the traumas . . . is basically a matter of the individual witness gaining linguistic control over his or her pain" (p. 5). Thus, it becomes obvious that some scholars focus on the effect of trauma at a collective and cultural level rather than the individual level.

According to Everyman et al. (2017), in contrast to the traditional notion of individual trauma as an injury imposed on the individual psyche or body as a result of a massive traumatic event, collective trauma "involves discursive practices, collectivities, collective memory and collective identity in a struggle to define what is experienced as traumatic" (pp. 13-14). Similarly, Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004) states that collective trauma "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness" (p. 1). The social entity becomes traumatized in situations such as when a "leader dies, a regime falls or . . . when environment of an individual or collectivity suddenly shifts in an unforeseen or unwelcome manner" (p. 2). Neil J. Smelser (2004) gives "American slavery, Holocaust, nuclear explosions" as examples of collective traumas the effects of which continue to reverberate in the present (p.

42). Kai Erikson (1995) argues that trauma shared at a collective level has two contradictory consequences; on the one hand it "damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (p.160). On the other hand, it "serves as an instrument to bring people together. Their shared experiences make the bond among them stronger" (p. 161). In that respect, the experiences of Holocaust survivors or other collectively-experienced traumas of violence or natural disasters both damage the social unity and bring the victims together around these shared experiences. Thus, trauma becomes a common culture and a collective memory for the social entity which continues to influence not only the ones distressed by it, but also the future generations. Kellerman (2007) likens collective trauma to a radioactive explosion, the large scale physical and psychical impact of which on the community persists in future generations. As he states,

> this is the essence of collective trauma. Its profound after-effects are manifold and far-reaching. Like a nuclear bomb that disperses its radioactive fallout in distant places even a long time after the actual explosion, any major psychological trauma continues to contaminate those who were exposed to it in one way or another in the first, second, and subsequent generations. (pp. 33-34)

Hence, the collectively-experienced traumatic situations continue to "contaminate" the children of the victims as there will always remain "traces of the blast imprinted upon the molested space of human consciousness" (p. 33). Similar to Kellerman, Arthur G. Neal (1998) also emphasizes the indelibility of collectively-experienced trauma on multiple generations as national trauma. From this perspective, it can be said that it is similar to memories of individual trauma which refuse to be buried and continue to haunt the individual. Neal argues that "just as the rape victim becomes permanently changed as a result of the trauma, the nation becomes permanently changed as a result of a trauma in the social realm" (p. 4). However, for an event to be remembered as traumatic collectively, it does not necessarily have to be inherently traumatic in the first place which means the group does not have to experience the event as traumatizing. As Alexander states (2004), "trauma is not result of group experiencing pain;" it is "the result of acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" which is sustained through the representation of the event (p. 10). Thus, the representations of the past in the present are important because, through these representations, meanings are attached to traumas as collective experiences. In that respect, the meaning-making agents in the society, which Alexander calls "collective actors" or "carrier groups," (Alexander, p. 10-12) such as political leaders, religious groups, media and state institutions, and intellectuals have an important effect on the representation

and transmission of experiences as collective traumas. These groups have a central role in articulating and representing the desire or voice of the troubled people.

According to Everyman et al. (2017), the "agents of memory selectively draw from a reservoir of images and stories in a process of remembering and forgetting . . . collective memory is thus an active process of meaning making in which various social forces compete" (p. 14). Thus, the arena of collective memory can become a site of both consensus and conflict (p. 15). The example of selective memories conflicting or competing with one another can be traced in the representations of the Vietnam War from different lenses. Hence, "in the United States, former activists in the antiwar movement, as well as dissenting veterans, represent and thus remember the Vietnam conflict differently from those found in official representations" (p. 15). Also, the War from the Vietnamese perspective and the Vietnamese American perspective differ from each other at the collective level. The national narratives and lessons of trauma are "objectified in monuments, museums and collective historical artifacts" (Alexander, 2004, p. 23), and displayed through ritual practices like holidays and commemorations (Everyman at al., 2017, p. 15). These sites and cultural practices are aimed to bring the traumatized society together under a collective identity and are part of working-through processes. For example, Vietnam's Veteran Memorial is part of this collective remembrance and working-through process. However, it does not mention the Vietnamese who fought in the War alongside the U.S. which also reinforces their invisibility in the official discourse. Therefore, the commemoration of collective experiences of the South Vietnamese population in the U.S. is done through alternative rituals and discursive practices. For instance, in the Vietnamese Americans' narrative, 30 April 1975 is remembered as the day of the beginning of their exile to the U.S. and loss of homeland and it is "commemorated as Black April Day or the Day of Mourning" (Everyman at al., p.25) with ceremonies attended by Vietnamese Americans from all around the U.S. The collective experiences of Vietnamese Americans are also conveyed through their literature. From this vantage point, Vietnamese American intellectuals and writers can be conceived as carrier groups for the expression of collectively-experienced trauma of the War and its continuous imprint on the multiple Vietnamese generations in the U.S. As a 1.5 generation writer Lan Cao, like many other Vietnamese American writers, focuses on the trauma and expresses that "many Vietnamese friends continue to reel from the events of April 1975 . . . it seems to loom perpetually in our hearts as something forever defining. We are here, but also still there, improbable survivors mauled always by 1975" (Cao & Cao, 2020, p. 37). In that respect, her novels *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* do not represent trauma

only as an individual experience but place it into a larger context with references to historical realities and collective experiences of the War. As the individual trauma is not disconnected from the collective experience and meanings attached by the community in both novels, individual healing struggles are not isolated from the collective actions.

To this end, this thesis focuses on the traumas of the Vietnamese who, after long a period of tragic events, left their country in high numbers only to find themselves in other distressing situations. The aim of this thesis is to further contribute to the efforts in the field of trauma studies that lay emphasis on the traumatic experiences of minority groups in Western nations. Although the trauma of the Vietnamese in the U.S. is mostly related to their experiences of the War in their homeland, intolerance to the Vietnamese presence in the U.S., and thus, their marginalization by Americans hinders the self-healing efforts of the Vietnamese. In spite of these difficulties which Cao portrays in her novels, the Vietnamese do not prefer a life of passivity; instead, they seek to heal their wounds in every possible way.

Chapter 1 concentrates on the traumatic events and their impact on Vietnamese war survivors. Relying on various trauma theories, the study argues that although the cause of their trauma is their experience of the War, their personality traits, ages, cultural beliefs also have a great effect on their traumatic symptoms. To put it in another way, similar traumatic situations do not necessarily result in exactly the same traumatic symptoms in different individuals. While some characters suffer deeply from different levels of dissociation, other characters might undergo symptoms related to melancholia. For instance, while Mai in *Monkey Bridge* suffers from sudden intrusions and flashbacks, Mai in *The Lotus and the Storm* has multiple personality disorder because she bore witness to traumatic events. Moreover, melancholia resulting from loss of loved ones is also an important issue in both novels, which leads to weakening of familial bonds and isolation from society. From a cultural perspective, belief in karma, spirit possession and placing importance on ancestral lands, which are lost after immigration to the U.S., constitute an important part of the traumas of Vietnamese war survivors. Besides individual traumas, this chapter also explores the effects of the War at a collective level. Similar stories of different Vietnamese individuals connect them around their shared experiences. Both novels give accounts of the events transforming the lives of numerous Vietnamese people and their present situation as refugees unwelcome by Americans. Therefore, this chapter deals with the traumas of survivors of war in both novels at an individual and collective level.

Chapter 2 analyzes the multiple paths taken by the characters in order to ease their pains. This chapter argues that similar to the traumatic symptoms, the efforts for healing from trauma vary according to different contexts, personality traits and cultural beliefs. Neither of Cao's novels offers a definite solution that will bring an unquestionable end to the sufferings of the trauma survivors. However, by portraying characters who perform multiple practices to ease their pain, Cao demonstrates that the trauma survivors are not just victims in a constant pathological state; instead, they are active agents in search for a potential recovery from trauma. Hence, in *Monkey Bridge*, Thanh tries to find peace by writing a diary about her past life. However, rather than writing about the traumatic events she creates an ideal place with positive memories that help her feel better in the present. Her daughter Mai chooses to conform to American society through getting an education, which she thinks will open the doors of a better future. In *The Lotus and the Storm*, Cao demonstrates the power of forgiveness which creates positive emotions rather than feelings of anger and hatred that keep trauma survivors stuck in the past. Besides, another factor that contributes to the possible recovery is the return to Vietnam where Mai has the opportunity to visit the grounds of her childhood memories, mourn for the lost loved ones and finally reconcile with her own trauma. This chapter also touches upon the importance of the community in both novels for the recovery of its members from their traumas. In that respect, the Vietnamese community in Little Saigon in the U.S. is under close scrutiny to understand how the Vietnamese display solidarity with one another in order to heal collectively.

In conclusion, *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*, as part of Vietnamese American literature, reveal the impact of the War on the Vietnamese whose voices are silenced by the dominant American discourse on the War. Through both her novels, Cao acts as an activist who portrays the suffering of Vietnamese Americans which has been ignored for decades. Thus, by the analysis of both novels, this study aims to be a part of the struggle by which this marginalized group attempts to make their voice heard. While focusing on their trauma, the heterogeneity of the experiences and diverse paths taken by different characters for a potential recovery are not ignored. Hence, to avoid a one-dimensional perspective, both traditional and pluralistic trauma approaches are employed in the analysis of the novels.

CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA IN *MONKEY BRIDGE* AND *THE LOTUS AND THE STORM*

Monkey Bridge (1997) begins with the main protagonist Mai's narrative about her feelings in the hospital where her mother Thanh stays half paralyzed as she has slumped in the bathroom and injured herself. Although the hospital is in Virginia. Mai cannot keep herself from thinking about the Saigon hospital in Vietnam where she witnessed an attack and an explosion. The effect of traumatic images of the injured soldiers and civilians in the Saigon hospital is so deeply engraved in her memory that she has difficulty in distinguishing the present from the past, which creates a sense of in-betweenness. Mai continues her narrative with the description of her mother Thanh, who has a big scar on her face, and calls out Mai's grandfather's name, Baba Quan, repeatedly in her sleep. For Mai, her mother suffers from the absence of the grandfather who was supposed to meet Thanh after leaving Vietnam on the day of 'the Fall of Saigon' but could not meet her at the designated place. The absence of her grandfather and his whereabouts are also a great mystery for Mai that she wants to solve. Once, she tries to go to Canada to call some phone numbers in Vietnam to ask about her grandfather in an attempt to bring him to the U.S. but her fear of being deported from the U.S. makes her return with the problem unsolved.

Mai repeatedly asks her mother about Baba Quan and whether she misses him but Thanh does not want to talk about him very much, which makes the situation even more mysterious for Mai. The only thing Mai learns about her grandfather is that he was a traditional man deeply bound to the lands in the Ba Xuyen village in the Mekong Delta that are thought to be left by their ancestors to be protected, thus cannot be left behind. Despite mumbling his name while sleeping, Thanh's silence about her father and her experiences of the War lead Mai to believe that her mother feels ashamed of having left him behind and just wants to forget him and all of her experiences related to the War. However, one day Mai discovers a diary which Thanh keeps in her drawer. The diary is both a comment on the present relationship between Mai and Thanh and an account of the rural lives of the people

in the Mekong Delta in pre-War times. Thanh narrates her birth, her childhood in the village and her marriage to her husband by giving vivid descriptions of the beautiful landscapes in the area. From the diary, which includes traditional beliefs of and stories about the Vietnamese people, it can also be understood that Thanh is not happy about Mai's inclination towards the American way of life, leaving her Vietnamese cultural background behind. Mai no longer listens to her mother's suggestions and warnings about the new country, which is unacceptable in the Vietnamese culture as the novel reveals.

After reading the first part of her mother's diary, Mai gives information about the Vietnamese community in Little Saigon which is an area in Northern Virginia populated by the Vietnamese refugees who have escaped from the War. This is a close-knit community whose members have traumatic experiences of the War, such as losing family members and being exposed to harsh conditions until making their way to the U.S. In the U.S., they are not welcomed readily by the Americans since they are regarded as the reminders of the War that American people try to forget. From time to time, the members of the community come together in one another's house to help each other and talk about their past experiences. These gatherings also take place in Mai and Thanh's house, which Mai thinks has several positive effects on her mother's psychology as they keep her busy by taking her out of her isolated and dark room.

For a period of time, Thanh seems to recover from the depression and impassivity stemming from her traumatic memories and experiences. One day, however, she suddenly commits suicide, leaving a letter for Mai revealing the impacts of trauma on her psychology and the reasons for her silence. The letter lays bare that Baba Quan is not Thanh's real father but a man who asks his wife, Thanh's mother, to sleep with the landlord named Uncle Khan in order not to lose the lands they farm like other tenant villagers. Out of this relationship, Thanh is born and is adopted by the landlord as his wife does not have any children. Although Thanh generally resides in Uncle Khan's house and all of her expenses are met by him, she is not aware that he is her real father. For her, he is just a rich and good man having no children who wants to raise her. After Thanh gets married and Mai is born, they start to live in Saigon. However, as the War becomes more violent, Mai is sent to the U.S. and Thanh returns to her village. Since the village is thought to be a meeting area for the Viet-Cong guerrillas, the Americans force the people to move to the newly built villages, called "strategic hamlets" (*MB*, p.233). Leaving their ancestral lands has traumatic effects on the villagers which leads to Thanh's mother's death as she thinks they have lost their soul.

Before her death, Thanh's mother reveals everything about Thanh's real past to her daughter and wants to be buried in their village.

After her mother's death, Thanh hires a river boat to take her mother's body to their village. This is important for her because she believes that her mother's soul will only find peace when reunited with their ancestors. When she arrives at the family graveyard, Thanh witnesses the murder of Uncle Khan by Baba Quan, which, as she states, continues to haunt her to the present day. Later, it becomes clear that Baba Quan has felt hatred towards the landlord because of their deal which results in Thanh's birth and he becomes a member of the Viet-Cong to seek revenge. Immediately after this act of murder, the village is bombed with napalms by the American army destroying everything. Thanh states: "I will always remember that moment as the moment the earth screamed its tormented scream" (pp. 250-251). Thanh gets wounded and loses her consciousness. Later, she finds herself in a hospital where she realizes that she lost her mother's body in the river. She can not arrange an appropriate burial which plays an important part in her sorrow in the present of the novel. The memories of the traumatic events and the karmic reasons attributed to them lead to Thanh's suicide as she believes that she is the product of a misdeed and as long as she is alive, she will not prevent bad karma ignited by the sins of older generations from passing onto Mai's life. The novel ends after this revelation and Mai's thoughts on the karmic transmission of the past sins to the next generations.

The Lotus and the Storm (2014) is composed of three main chapters and twenty-nine sub-chapters narrated mainly by Mai, her father Minh and one of her multiple personalities Bao. The first main chapter entitled "A Small Country," is about Mai's childhood spent with her family in the city of Cholon between 1963 and 1975. It begins with the description of peaceful days in the city where Mai's mother Quy is busy with her work while Mai and her sister Khanh always play games in the street. Mai describes these times as follows: "Inside this coveted sphere, the world is filled with happiness even as the bashful sun disappears" (*TLTS*, p. 5). For the family, the only sign about the ongoing war in rural areas is their father's occasional disappearance as an army officer since he attends military operations in the rural areas. However, this peaceful atmosphere becomes ruined when the Viet-Cong carry out an attack on their car resulting in injuries and Khanh's death. After that event, the relationship among the family members deteriorates and Mai loses her speaking ability because of the shock she experiences at the moment of the traumatic event. She describes herself as "someone who has lost her soul" (p. 108). Her mother and father also start to blame

themselves and each other for their daughter's death which causes problems in their marriage.

Mai's mother Quy does not only lose her ties to her husband, but she also becomes a melancholic and alcoholic person isolated from the society and enters a long period of mourning. To describe Quy's situation, Mai states that "next door, night after night, our mother's grief works its way deeper inside her bones and sinews. Grief engulfs her very spirit" (p. 111). Witnessing her sister's death and absence of her parents' attention lead to Mai's isolation and her friendship with animals, such as a cricket and a mynah bird, instead of socializing with other children. However, after a while she starts to feel the presence of another person in her room who, she believes, is her dead sister's soul. Besides, the mynah bird starts to call the name 'Cecile' when it sees Mai, which makes her uneasy but she is unable to understand why the bird repeats that name.

In the course of time, Mai begins to regain her speaking ability as she tries to react to the bird's persistent calls. This recovery seems to bring the family together again and provides a temporary peaceful atmosphere in the house. This situation does not last long because during the Tet, the traditional New Year's Eve for the Vietnamese people, the Viet-Cong start a massive attack on the major cities of South Vietnam and the street where Mai and her family live turns into a battleground. During the heavy bombing and rocket attacks, Mai tries to find her mother desperately in shock but the only thing she hears is the sounds of bullets and shouting soldiers. The extremity of this traumatizing event causes Mai to lose her consciousness for a moment and when she awakens, she loses her speaking ability again. The atrocity experienced in the second event contributes to the fragile and staggering relationships among family members, and accusations between Quy and Minh bring their marriage almost to an end. Mai's silence and the symptoms of multiple personalities as a result of the events are interpreted by her family as her being possessed by spirits and, that is why a traditional shaman is called in order to help her. Although Mai regains her speaking ability, her multiple personalities continue to intervene in her later life even in the U.S.

In the first chapter, Mai's narrative runs in parallel with her father's. Minh's narrative is retrospective with reference to political and historical facts. He lives with Mai in the U.S. in 2006 and imaginatively returns to Vietnam, describing the political and military events that led to the collapse of South Vietnam. As Minh is a high-ranking army officer and a paratrooper, he describes his experiences in the battles as a soldier and in accordance with

the military situation of the time. In contrast to Mai's narrative which takes place only in the past, Minh's narrative is about both the past and the present. Sometimes the images of the Iraq war on the television and sometimes a story he hears take him back to the times in Vietnam. He criticizes the wrong decisions taken by the U.S. and the South Vietnamese military regime as the reasons for losing the War. Similar to Mai, he also describes the deteriorating relationship between him and his wife whose absence continues to affect him negatively in the present. His narrative also includes the description of Mai in the present time as someone who continues to have the symptoms of trauma through her multiple personalities and a limited social life.

In the second chapter of the novel which is entitled "Half- Lives," the narrators are Mai and one of her multiple personalities called Bao, which means both keepsake and storm in Vietnamese. Through Bao's narrative, it becomes clearer that she is the result of traumatic experiences Mai has gone through. She states that she is hidden inside Mai and carries the traces of past traumatic events which Mai tries to forget or repress. Bao describes herself as the Vietnamese side of Mai who tries to be Americanized but fails to do so because of Bao. While Bao describes the present situation of Mai and her repressed feelings in 2006, Mai's narrative is mainly about the past when her father and she escaped Vietnam and settled in Virginia. For some reasons, Mai's mother Quy does not leave the country with her family and their connection is cut off after they arrive in the U.S. The only information about Quy and the situation in Vietnam is given through a letter sent by Phong, a friend of Minh and a former South Vietnamese soldier. Phong's letter demonstrates that after the War, the situation for the South Vietnamese individuals, especially the ones who have connections with the fallen regime, is worsening. People leave the country in huge numbers by boats and other means of transport in order to take refuge in nearby countries. In the middle of all these events, Mai's mother continues to live in Cholon and does not stop visiting her daughter's tomb. This chapter ends as the letter ends which leaves Mai and her father in distress.

The last chapter is named "The River Flows but the Ocean Stays" and includes the narratives by Mai, Bao and Minh. Minh continues to read the remaining part of the letter in 2006 sent by Phong in 1978 from a refugee camp in Malaysia. According to the letter, Quy arranges a boat for some of her relatives and friends through her business connections with Chinese traders. Although she wants to remain in Vietnam, she is forced by Phong and her brother to get on the boat and leave the country. However, the journey does not last long as the pirates attack the boat and rape her and other women. After that, Quy dies as a result of

hemorrhaging, and her body is thrown into the sea to fulfil her last wish which is to stay in Vietnam with her dead daughter. Having read the letter again in the present time, Minh feels angry towards Phong as he blames him for his wife's death, and he does not want to meet him in spite of Phong's persistent demands to speak to him and to be forgiven. Eventually, they come together in the hospital where Minh is, and Minh forgives his friend since he sees that Phong also suffers from a guilty conscience and trauma. One week after Phong's visit, Minh dies saying his last words that reveal his desire to reunite with his dead wife and daughter.

The last scene in the novel takes place in Vietnam where Mai returns in order to take her father's body to bury him in the native lands. While travelling in the city, she learns that her childhood friend James, who was thought to have died in the War, is still alive. Mai meets James and they talk about their childhood memories and experiences after the War. She visits the street where they lived before the War and remembers the old happy days with her family. Finally, Mai and James hire a boat to throw her father's ashes into the Saigon River which flows into the ocean where her mother died. After throwing the ashes, Mai returns to the countryside and feels that her mother, father and sister are reunited and their souls are wondering happily in the fields.

Both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* present the effects of trauma on the characters through various representations. All of the main characters experiencing the traumatic situations reflect the signs of traumatic memory and through their narratives and behaviors, traumatic symptoms are presented. The effects of the traumatizing events on the characters are displayed in various forms of dissociation, melancholia and silence. In both novels, the main characters and the community they live in have not recovered from their wounds of the War and the following traumatic experiences. In that respect, both novels start with epigraphs from T. S Eliot's "Waste Land" which set the tone of the novels from the beginning and metaphorically present the nature of the traumatizing experiences as imposing themselves on the present lives of the victims. The epigraph in *Monkey Bridge* reads:

> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
>
> And I will show you something different from either
>
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
>
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
>
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The epigraph in *The Lotus and the Storm* reads:

> Who is the third who walks always beside you?
>
> When I count, there are only you and I together
>
> But when I look ahead up the white beside you
>
> Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
>
> I do not know whether a man or a woman
>
> ---But who is that on the other side of you

When these lines are considered in relation to the individual experiences in the novels, it is noticeable that the presence of another entity, be it a shadow or a person, creates a sense of uneasiness. In the novels, it is the traumatic past experience that continuously follows the individuals in their present like a shadow of a person that does the same. The word 'shadow' is mentioned multiple times in Lan Cao's own memoir in order to express the effect of her childhood experiences on her present identity. She states "my shadow selves are denser, perhaps more fragmented from the self . . . They might seem like strangers at first, unknown, unknowable, and as a result frightening, a presence manifesting unruly states that had to be fought with or unshackled from" (Cao & Cao, 2020, p. 9). Thus, the past becomes a haunting presence in the lives of the individuals with its frightening aspects that cannot be escaped from. As Te-Hsing Shan (2010) states, these excerpts demonstrate that "past, present, and future are no longer separated or separable" (p. 38). This inability to separate the past from the present is also mentioned in the works of many trauma studies. The intrusive characteristics of the traumatic memories cause the trauma victims to drift into the past and re-live the traumatic moments or live in a constant state of melancholia in the present time. In that respect, both novels present examples of individuals who are still under the influence of their traumatic past.

In both novels, the haunting presence of past experiences in the lives of characters is demonstrated through flashbacks, sudden time shifts, narrative gaps and multiple personalities who come out as a result of the traumatizing events. As Judith Herman (1992) states, the memories of traumatic events are not easily buried even if the individuals try to "banish them from the consciousness" (p. 1). The impact of past memories on present lives is demonstrated through the narrative structure of the novels. The narratives in both novels follow a non-linear direction with past and present situations amalgamated which leaves the characters in an in-between state. Michelle Satterlee (2004) uses the term "narrative

dissociation" (p. 143) in order to explain the literary strategy the author uses to demonstrate the impact of trauma on the characters' memory. Through narrative dissociation, which suddenly takes the characters from the present moment to the traumatic past situation, the effect of trauma on the present lives of the characters is emphasized. According to Michele Balaev (2012) "narrative dissociation shows a transformed state of consciousness in which perception shifts quickly between the past and the present, causing an altered sense of reality and identity" (p. 44). In that respect, both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* have examples of narrative dissociation which demonstrate that the characters have difficulty in separating the present from the past.

In the opening scenes of *Monkey Bridge* when Mai visits her mother, she seems to experience a sudden intrusion of the traumatic past experience which causes disorientation and inability to control the present situation. The novel begins with intrusive memories the imposition of which, in the present, takes the character back to the times of the actual event when the trauma was experienced. Mai starts her narrative with the description of the hospital in Saigon although she is in a hospital in the U.S. She states that

> the smell of blood, warm and wet, rose from the floor and settled into the solemn stillness of the hospital air. I could feel it like an unhurried chill in my joints, a slow-moving red that smoldered in a floating ether of dull, gray smoke all around me, the bare walls expanded and converged into a relentless stretch of white . . . A scattering of gunshots tore through the plaster walls. Everything was unfurling, everything and I knew I was back there again, as if the tears were always pooled in readiness beneath my eyes. It was all coming back, a fury of whiteness rushing against my head with violent percussive rage. The automatic glass doors closed behind me with sharp suckling sound. (p. 1)

Mai is aware that she is not in Vietnam but in the U.S. as she expresses, "Arlington Hospital was not a Saigon hospital . . . I knew I was not in Saigon" (pp. 1-2). She needs to remind herself continuously that she is not in the past in order to reorient herself in the present. However, she cannot keep herself from drifting into traumatic scenes in the past. The past situation overcomes the present reality and puts Mai in the previously-experienced traumatic state. Mai starts to visualize people shouting and crying in terror because of the explosions: "'Oh God, oh God, oh my God' people cried. The doctor, the medic and the operating-room crew killed in a cramped, battered room reinforced by rows of military green sandbags. The calm of Saigon had always been unreliable" (p. 2). Mai's sentences describing the condition she goes through demonstrate that she is reliving the traumatic situation. Her sentences are highly imagistic rather than having a clear narrative structure to give a meaningful idea of what happened in the hospital. Her narrative starts suddenly with a description of her feelings

in the middle of an attack. Obviously, she has not integrated her traumatic memories into the narrative structure of her normal memories. The unassimilable nature of a traumatic memory into mental schema, which hinders its clear verbal narrative in the present, is defined as an important aspect in traditional trauma studies. In that respect, van der Kolk and van der Hart (1991) state that "[u]nder extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the "memory" of these experiences to be stored differently" (p. 422). Mai's dissociative narrative clearly indicates that her experience is stored not like the ordinary memories which disrupt the present reality and come out not voluntarily but intrusively. The intrusiveness and involuntary nature of these memories is stated in Mai's sentences as she expresses that she knows she is not in the Saigon hospital but still she cannot keep herself from remembering bad experiences.

One of the reasons that Mai remembers the traumatic experience is the association of the present condition with the past situation in which the trauma occurred. As van der Kolk and van der Hart state "traumatic memory occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation" (p. 431). When considered in that respect, Mai's re-living the traumatic situation in the hospital is not a coincidence. The atrocity she experienced occurred in the hospital which is associated with the present hospital where she comes to visit her mother. Thus, the smell of the hospital and the whiteness of the walls trigger her memories. As she experienced the traumatic event within the white walls of the hospital, this color is associated with "the color of mourning, the standard color of ghost, bones and funerals" (*MB*, p. 2) rather than other positive meanings. She is only able to return to the present moment when her friend Bobbie starts to talk about the toys they bought for her mother to exercise. At this moment, Mai starts to comment on her own condition. She states: "Bobbie had no subverted interior and would never see the things I saw. I could feel the sharp, unsubdued scent of chemicalized smoke as I watched her meander a collection of toys" (p. 2) The words "subverted interior" show that Mai is aware of her trauma which divided her consciousness into two. Because of the dissociated nature of the traumatic memory, she cannot feel like Bobbie as these memories constantly intrude into the present. Her awareness does not enable her to keep these memories under control as she keeps re-living these memories under similar situations.

The vividness of Mai's memories about the traumatic scene in the past can also be explained by the idea that these memories are frozen in time and are not easily re-worked or re-categorized with the passage of time like the normal memories (van der Kolk & van der

Hart, 1991, p. 447). Traumatic memories are, in a sense, fixated at a particular time in the past and the consequent experiences do not alter these memories. Mai's description of the event demonstrates that she is fixated on the trauma, and that the traumatic scenes are frozen in time. She cannot comment on the situation as something that happened in the past. It is out of modification as she re-experiences the same situation and feels the same horror as she felt at the time of the event. According to Herman (1992) "traumatized patients suffer from a combination of generalized anxiety symptoms and specific fears . . . they have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on the alert for danger" (p. 35). Van der Kolk (1996) also emphasizes the high level of arousal that causes the trauma survivors to re-live the traumatic moment again. When these people are under pressure, "they act as if they were being traumatized all over again" (p. 291). Mai's fear that she will experience the same situation again demonstrates that she is on the alert even in the present. When she is in the lobby of the hospital in Arlington U.S., she remembers her father's warnings to avoid the front part of the buildings as these are dangerous parts that are the most defenseless areas to a bombing by the attackers. Since Mai has experienced this before, she feels insecure in the present although she is far away from danger. The feeling of danger increases the level of arousal on her nerves to such a degree that she describes her situation in these words:

> I willed my mind blank and tried to keep a calm, steady gaze. 'One wrong move,' as my father used to say, and the force of too many things abruptly rammed inside my brain. I was already back there in the military hospital in Saigon . . . One wrong move and something had tipped one notch too far and everything was pouring inside out, a live current of nervous wires connecting me to disorder, to insanity. (p. 12)

The words "one wrong move" describe how fragile and shaky Mai's traumatic mind is. Her alertness to the similar situation of the traumatic scene in the past increases the possibility of drifting into past memories. The "one wrong move," which can be taken as her reaction to her present environment, indicates that when Mai feels she is in danger which is a resulting symptom of her traumatic past, she loses her control to a degree that she names it as disorder and insanity. Mai's traumatic experience results in what Elizabeth F. Howell (2011) names "partial dissociation" which, in contrast to full dissociation that leads to multiple personalities, manifests itself through intrusive visual images, "auditory experiences that include hearing voices, unexplainable thoughts and emotions . . . impulses, and thoughts" (p.7). During the re-living of trauma, her dissociated memory takes the executive control and brings the past situation with visual images, and emotions, such as fear and shock.

Throughout the novel, Mai re-experiences dissociation when she finds herself in a stressful situation or when she associates something with her traumatic past.

The effect of the traumatic incident which results in the dissociation of memory can also be seen in Cao's second novel *The Lotus and the Storm*. However, the symptoms of trauma display themselves as not just a partial dissociation that brings the victim to the scene of the trauma with intrusive thoughts and flashbacks. The excessiveness of shock and fear causes dissociative identity disorder that creates three different dissociated personalities which sometimes switch and take control of the narrative.

In order to better understand the concept of dissociation and the dissociative identity disorder, the first signs and later developments of which are presented in the novel, the studies on this phenomenon in the field of trauma studies are of great importance. One of the pioneering figures on dissociation is the French psychiatrist, Pierre Janet. The reading of Janet's studies by Onno van der Hart and Rutger Horst (1989) contributes to the understanding of dissociative identity disorder. In their joint work on dissociated identities, Hart and Horst mention a patient named Lucie treated by Janet who had multiple personalities as a result of a traumatic event that sometimes replaced each other. Lucie's second personality had its own name, Adrianne, who could feel "everything that Lucie did not feel" (Hart & Horst, p. 400). Janet named the second personality Lucie2 and she sometimes took the executive control of the behaviors that Lucie1 did not remember. However, Janet's hypnotic treatment also brought forward the third personality that was named Lucie3 who also remembered the things which the second personality Adrianne did not remember. As a result of his observation, Janet argued that "these dissociated nuclei of consciousness were independent from the central personality" Lucie1, and they "developed in response to vehement emotional experiences" (qtd in Hart & Horst p. 403). The emergence of these personalities was thought to have different reasons but they especially came into being as a result of a traumatic experience.

The feeling of terror as a response to atrocities has an important role in the development of dissociative identities. However, that does not mean that any individual encountering a traumatic event will have this symptom (Hart & Horst p. 408). In that respect, Janet focuses on the subjective reception of the traumatic event, not the objective aspects of it which means "certain patients responded with extreme fear or anger to situations which were trivial for most other people" (Hart & Horst, p. 408). According to Hart and Horst, the

secondary personalities of a traumatized individual become much stronger as the central personality is weakened in the later years (p. 403). "These dissociated nuclei of consciousness continue to lead lives of their own, as demonstrated by Lucie/Adrianne. Different nuclei of consciousness alternate in taking over the behavior, or interfere with each other" (p. 404). A similar situation can be traced in *The Lotus and the Storm* considering Mai's symptoms. In the course of time, Mai's repeated traumatic experiences and the feeling of terror and anger in these situations lead her dissociative personalities to gradually become stronger. Even after many years they continue to affect her life in the U.S. The symptoms of her dissociative identity disorder manifest through dissociative narratives that include different perspectives of the same situations in the past revealed by Bao's comments on the events.

Although the present time in the novel is 2006, Mai's retrospective narration of the past events in 1967 is not done in the past tense. She uses the present tense for the description of her childhood times which at first include good memories with her family in Cholon but disrupted by sudden and unexpected events. This reveals that she is unable to make a distinction between the past and the present since she re-lives her trauma in the present. The first situation that causes her trauma is her sister's death in an attack by the Viet-Cong militants. Mai gives a very detailed narrative of the event with highly visual and sensory descriptions. In order to express the later effects of this first traumatic situation on her, Mai states:

> I felt a mass of churning emotions inside me. I thought it had to do with my sister, with the lingering imprint of her presence, with the fact that certain things can attach themselves to your body and soul and cling forever to your heart. Even after the fleshly presence, a fragment of a memory might remain, spinning alternative versions of what might have been. That was what I thought and the feeling that there was another person nearby became more pronounced. Is there someone on the other side of me? So when this charge surges, I recognize it immediately. A body double is clinging seamlessly to me, like a double helix that has been lovingly orchestrated into a single wave, dancing out there, matching my movements. It's there but it's outside my range of vision. I snap my head around. Still, I cannot see . . . My sister has turned into a ghost, a flying extravagant figure that floats and hovers, creeps and crawls, always watching over me. She's here, I say to myself. (p. 129)

Mai's description of her situation in the days after her sister's death demonstrates the first signs of dissociative disorder. She has clearly become fixated on her sister's death and the traumatic scene which is indicated through her words such as "certain things attach themselves," "a fragment of memory" and "a mass of churning emotions." She has not

integrated the memories of the traumatic event, and the impacts of this experience manifest themselves in dissociative episodes that she is not aware of. Her feeling of the presence of another person who she thinks is the ghost of her sister is the first sign of the dissociative identity disorder. This dissociative disorder becomes more apparent when the mynah bird, which she has taken as a present from her friend and which has an ability to mimic human voice, calls her Cecile. The novel does not have another Cecile character, so the repeated calls of the bird create a confusion in the family. Mai also does not have any idea on who Cecile is as she questions "Cecile? Who is Cecile, I wonder? What a marvel. Galileo has invented a new game for us . . . I hesitate. I can almost see Cecile's shadow by my side" (p. 137). Although Mai's family thinks that she has recovered from the memories of the traumatic event, the bird's insistence on that name while playing with Mai reveals that the belated impact of the trauma continues to haunt her in dissociative episodes that she does not remember. In this first example of dissociation, Mai's situation may seem to support the traditional perspective of trauma which concentrates on the immediate forgetting of the traumatic event. However, Mai's narrative clearly demonstrates that she remembers the moment of the traumatic event by a detailed description. On the other hand, the development of a secondary dissociative personality which comes out during some periods which are not remembered by Mai depicts that trauma also has belated effects that can lead to episodic forgetting.

The development of dissociative disorder is later triggered by another traumatic event that causes a more severe form of dissociation, the impact of which continues to manifest itself through occasional trances in the later years. One year after the first traumatic event, which takes place in 1967, another attack is carried out by the militants which turns the street where Mai's family lives into a battlefield. The date of the occurrence of the second event is important because it happens during the 'Tet,' which is the traditional new year day in Vietnamese culture and accepted as a sacred time both by North and South Vietnamese people. Because of its holiness for both parties, nobody expects an assault by the North Vietnmaese soldiers, therefore celebrations are carried out in Mai's family house as if nothing disastrous would occur. However, the sudden assault in the area turns this sacred day into a day of trauma. Similar to the first incident, the unexpected and disastrous nature of the second event places it beyond what Herman (1992) calls the "ordinary human adaptation" (p. 32). During and after the attack Mai goes through a state of trance in which

her dissociated mind is demonstrated vividly. Mai continues to narrate the event and its psychological effects on her:

> And then it all returns—as if in an interlocking reflex of events. A siren goes off. Streaks of light flash above, in front of me, and everywhere. The windowpanes of the house shatter. Our trees dry valiantly to wave away the rattle of gunfire. A large branch jumps and snaps. As the sky shrinks, I taste bile in the back of my throat. Blue and purple dots hanging in front of me, becoming more agitated as I hold my head to steady a pang of dizziness . . . Consciousness begins to slip out of me. I feel the fleeting burden of two selves separating, like gritty shadows against a dimming light, my sister and I, conjoined and then suddenly not. I watch and am watched at the same time. (p. 158)

Mai's description indicates that during the traumatic situation, she becomes vulnerable by the extremity and vehemence of the event. Dissociation seems to be the only way for her to stand against the fierceness of the situation. As Herman states, when people are vulnerable to such situations, as they cannot take action to protect themselves, they may choose the state of passivity, and the "helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness" (p. 42). In that respect, dissociation becomes a psychological defense mechanism for Mai to escape from the reality of the traumatic event. It is not a physical escape but a state of narrowing and dissociating the consciousness as this state is unbearable.

During the moment in which dissociation occurs "time tense may be altered, often with a sense of slow motion . . . the person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body" (Herman, 1992, p. 43). Mai's narrative also continues with a slow-motion description of the movements around her as if she is not a victim in the middle of the traumatic situation but an observer from an outside perspective. What she experiences is identified as 'depersonalization,' which means "experiences of unreality or detachment from one's mind, self, or body," and "de-realization that includes "the experiences of unreality or detachment from one's surroundings" (APA, 2013, p. 291) In her narrative, the recollection of the event is followed by amnesia. Her experience and the immediate forgetting of the event is explained by traditional trauma theorists as a most common feature of a traumatic situation that inflicts terror on the victims. van der Kolk (1996) expresses that in traumatic situations "amnesia co-exists with vivid recollections" (p. xiv). In that respect Mai states that

> [a]lthough I would like to be able to say more about what happens next, the truth is I do not remember. I black out. After it is all over, I can only feel the snapping after effect that is lodged deep inside my chest. (p. 159)

Her words emphasize the belated nature of trauma manifesting itself through a short period of amnesia for the specific part of the event. According to American Psychiatric Association (2013), this short amnesia is called "selective amnesia" which means that the victim does not forget the whole traumatic event but just specific aspects of it. This is the most distinctive aspect of dissociative amnesia (p. 291). Although she remembers the initial part of the event, the extremity of it makes it hard for Mai to fully assimilate it into her conscious memory. That creates a gap in her memory which is followed by the following impacts of dissociation.

Mai starts to feel the presence of another personality who she thinks is stronger than her since that personality starts to take control of her behavior. She states that the other person cannot be controlled or maintained with her fearful feature: "An angry, scowling face, mottled red, not mine, not my dead sister's either, stares back at me. There is a look of grudge and injury on it" (p.177). She urges Mai to be silent until the danger is over and Mai obeys (p. 179). By obeying the personality that she unconsciously conjured, Mai, in a way, carries her defense mechanism to a different level as she finds the suggestion of the personality beneficial to her well-being since it enables her to escape from the situation more easily.

In this part of the narration, another evident aspect of the traumatic situation is the outcome occurring as anger. This feeling of anger is indicated in Mai's father Minh's narrative about Mai's situation after the event. When he finally arrives home to find Mai in a traumatic and tranced state, he expresses: "She was all force, all resistance . . . she wanted to scream and bite and kick even as her fingernails dug themselves into my flesh. My child had changed, she had metamorphosed and crossed into an elaborately different realm" (p. 200). It is evident that the terror she feels is accompanied by a feeling of anger towards herself and others along with destructive behavior.

The reason of the feeling of anger at the traumatic situation which contributes to the dissociated state of Mai's mind is further elaborated by Bao's perspective in the later chapters as she gives details that are not included in Mai's narrative. The feeling of anger during the traumatic situation is emphasized by trauma scholars as a contributing factor to the dissociative state. According to Herman (1992), feelings of betrayal and helplessness during the atrocities contribute to people's traumas since they lack the necessary protection required from close relatives (p. 55). The absence of the protective figures breaches the sense of trust and leaves the victim in a state of insecurity. These senses of insecurity and helplessness cause the feeling of anger especially in the child as the call for help is not answered. As Van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane (1996) argue, the feelings of "loss, anger, betrayal and helplessness" are common feelings in a traumatic situation (p. 11).

Distressing feelings "related to interpersonal safety, anger, and emotional needs may give rise to dissociative episodes which may in turn be accompanied by increased self-destructive behavior" (p. 205). Janet also emphasizes the extreme emotions of anger and fear when the victims of trauma are not able to take appropriate action during the traumatic event. These emotions have strong effects on the individual's mind who has already displayed the signs of dissociative personality (qtd in Hart & Horst, p. 408). Analyzing Mai's behavior in her trance state in the light of these theories makes it possible to understand the anger and aggressiveness she demonstrates.

In the middle of the attacks, Mai runs around in a state of panic looking for her mother for protection. She believes that Quy will return to help and to get her out of the situation as she states "[a] part of me believes they will suddenly emerge from shadowy corners and pull me into their well-concealed hiding place" (p. 160). Mai's strong belief that her mother will protect her stems from the special relationship between the mother and the child. Mai states: "On instinct I count on motherhood to do its part . . . As I climb into the cistern to hide from the line of fire, I still believe my mother will come back to look for me and take me with her to safety" (p. 160). The anticipation that the mother will come and save her starts to fade as she starts to lose her consciousness and becomes overpowered by the angry presence of the dissociative personality. The disappointment and emotional breakdown because of the absence of the mother's protection are also described by Bao. The word Bao means both storm and keepsake in the Vietnamese language (p. 225) referring to Mai's repressed or dissociated memory and the rage she feels during the traumatic situation. As the word suggests, Bao, as a dissociative personality, is an outcome of the situation which results in the feelings of helplessness and anger as the calls for help are not responded to by the closest relatives who are expected to give support at all times. Bao's narrative includes the details of this anger. When Bao narrates her appearance, she blames her mother and states: "[It] is always about her repudiations, her disappearance and withdrawal . . . what I longed for most was her animal warmth, the soulfulness of her motherly presence" (p. 238). The absence of the protection and warmth by Quy is also desired before the event itself and the traumatic situation intensifies this desire more than before but it is not answered. Bao continues: "I return to those starkly separated scenes when she and I were in differently configured positions . . . Mai dipped and dodged and scurried after Mother" (p. 238) However, instead of Mai's name, her mother searches for and calls the name of her dead sister which creates a sense of unimportance and feeling of abandonment in the child. After that moment, Bao takes the executive control of the self with anger towards Mai which is actually Mai's

feelings towards herself as she regards herself as an unimportant person. This feeling of weakness and sense of unimportance in the traumatic situation is described by Bao as follows:

> For that one moment I despised her, her smallness, her weakness. In that moment of piercing consciousness, my dislike of her grew and I saw how easily she could be blotted out, how insignificant she was in the shifting order of our world. I saw her lying there, like a withered thing turned brown, and I was seized and possessed by an urge to injure her. She deserved to be harmed. (p. 239)

Thus, the immediate result of Mai's inability to get out of the situation and seeing herself as an unimportant person trigger her already-existing personality disorder which comes over her in another dissociative form that has two features. First, it takes control of the situation by causing Mai to give up the calls for the mother and stay silent as it turns out that these calls will not be answered in the middle of the atrocity, as Bao states "it was the continuing silence that ultimately saved us" (p. 239). The second is that it is also destructive since the victim loses the belief that, as a child, she must be important for the parents and protected in all situations. The breach in this belief turns the victim to despise and harm herself in the dissociated states which will continue in the upcoming episodes. When Mai's traumatic memories are triggered by similar situations which occur through associations or when she feels under stress, she screams and harms herself in trance states.

In contrast to the Mai in *Monkey Bridge* who experiences half dissociation which means that her present life in the U.S. is occasionally disrupted by PTSD symptoms such as images, flashbacks and dreams which take her to the traumatic situation, Mai in *The Lotus and the Storm* re-experiences these situations in more destructive intervals and trances. Mai in the first novel is very well aware of the present situation and she has the ability to differentiate between the past and the present but she cannot control the sudden appearance of these memories which make it hard for her to navigate in the present moment. She tries to gain control over this conflict between the present and the past and to repress traumatic memories. Mai in the second novel, however, re-lives her trauma through her dissociated personalities. She does not remember what she experiences in the present moment. Similar to Janet's patient Lucie, whose dissociated identities carry out some behaviors in the present and remember the things that the 'usual personality' does not remember, Mai also carries out some actions in the present through her dissociated personalities, and she also has amnesia for some parts of traumatic situations she experienced in the past which are remembered by her other personalities.

Experiencing the traumatic situation through different forms of dissociation is one of the main aspects of the representation of trauma in Cao's both novels. Another striking feature is the constant state of melancholia which continues to affect the present lives of the characters. The sudden and unexpected loss of loved ones and forced immigration to the U.S. because of the destructive war do not let the victims mourn for their close relatives. This situation affects nearly all the characters in both novels. The melancholic state of these individuals can better be understood in the light of Sigmund Freud's theory on melancholia. In his 1917 article "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud presents the situations which lead people to depressing and melancholic states. Freud makes a distinction between mourning which is a normal reaction to the loss of a loved object and melancholia. From Freud's perspective, the lost object does not have to be a person; it can also be a country, an ideal or something associated with the loved person. Losing an object of love can also produce melancholia which is regarded by Freud as a pathological situation. Freud states that when people lose an object of love, they go through a period called mourning which includes "loss of interest in the outside world . . . loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love . . . and turning away from any activity that is not connected with the thoughts" of the lost object (p. 244). This process can be a painful one as the person, who has lost the object of love, has not withdrawn the libido from that object and has not yet invested it in another substitute object. Freud states that

> [r]eality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object . . . Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless, its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time . . . Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. (pp. 244-245)

No matter how unpleasurable this process is, at the end of the mourning, the person becomes detached from the lost object and turns his/her attention to other objects as substitutes. In a sense, the mourner gradually accepts what he/she has lost after this process, overcomes the loss of interest in the outside world, and eventually returns to normal life.

However, when the person is not able to accomplish the process of mourning, a melancholic state, which Freud (1917) names a pathological condition, occurs (p. 243). The person becomes fixated on the lost object and cannot detach the libido from it. This fixation and inability to get away from the thoughts related to the lost object creates a constant grief in the melancholic. Sometimes, the melancholic does not perceive consciously what he/she

has lost even if he/she is "aware of the loss which has given rise to melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (p. 245). In that respect, Freud makes another distinction between mourning and melancholia: Although melancholia is more about an unconscious inability to detach from something, in the mourning process, there is nothing unconscious about the loss. Thus, for Freud, the discomfort or unease a melancholic person feels can be difficult to understand for other people because they may not figure out the reason of his occupied situation (p. 246). Another aspect of melancholia as a pathology is that it causes people to lose their self-respect towards themselves. Freud asserts that

> [t]he patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy . . . extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better. (p. 246)

Because of the grief and accusations towards the self, the melancholic person's interest in her/his environment becomes diminished similar to the mourner but does not end after a period of time. Melancholic people become so troubled with the fixed memories of lost objects and self-accusations that they cannot sleep well and refuse to have the nutrition necessary for their health. In some extreme situations of melancholia, the patient loses the very instinct to continue living which means that they might have a tendency to commit suicide. When Freud's theories are applied to Cao's novels, it can be seen that the victims of trauma continue to live in a melancholic state in their present life as they are still occupied with their losses since they could not have the chance to mourn for them.

In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai's melancholia stems mainly from her grandfather's absence whose whereabouts is a main impasse throughout the novel. Mai states the effect of her grandfather's absence in these words:

> For the past three and a half years, my mother and I had lived quietly with the tragedy of my grandfather's disappearance, and I, in moments alone, had tried to piece together the missing minutes that led to his absence. The muffled stillness of that day continued to cast a long, heavy pall over our lives. (p. 10)

As Mai's words demonstrate, apart from her witnessing the traumatic situation, the absence of a loved person also creates a state of constant melancholia. Mai is fixated on the absence of her grandfather throughout the novel and she wants to find and bring him to the U.S. As

her questions about his whereabouts and what happened to him are not answered by her mother, Mai becomes more obsessed with finding information about him. Apart from some occasional memories, Mai does not remember much about her grandfather as he was living in the Mekong Delta, not in Saigon where she lived. However, his absence in the new country creates unease for Mai. It is because, for Mai, Baba Quan is a traditional Vietnamese villager who embodies the memories of the lost country. Mai also remembers his teachings about the importance of being close to the ancestral lands and relatives in the Vietnamese culture. She remembers his words that "the soul becomes sad if it is left unattended by its descendants" (p. 59). He also states "the farther we wander from the earth and water of the burial ground, the weaker our ties to our ancestors become, and the separation is not good for the soul" (p. 60). Thus, Mai's obsession with Baba Quan is actually a desire to fulfill the absence of the country as ancestral land which was left behind. The effect of this separation which results in the melancholic state in the present is expressed by Mai as she comments on its effect on her present situation. After her sudden departure from the country by plane, Mai states: "The fear of separation I suddenly understood that day to be a fear as primordial as the fear of death. Once felt, it stays forever trapped, like a child's muffled cry, inside one's chest" (p. 97). Hence, for Mai, finding and bringing her grandfather to the U.S. would ease the trauma of separation from the ancestral lands as her grandfather represents what she has lost.

Mai's description of her mother and Thanh's suicide letter also demonstrate that Thanh suffers from a serious melancholia which even leads to the deterioration of her relationship with her daughter in the country they presently inhabit. At first, Mai does not know what exactly makes her mother so melancholic as Thanh does not speak about herself or the traumatic experiences she has gone through. Thus, at first, Thanh's condition is conveyed through Mai's portrayal until her diary and letter are revealed.

Mai's depiction indicates that Thanh is going through a serious depression of losing her country and loved ones. Although Thanh does not speak much, Mai feels her mother's emotions. At the beginning of the novel, Mai expresses that

> [s]he stared at me with importunate eyes and I could see frustration, nostalgia in the looks she gave me, beneath the fault line of rage that threatened always to crack open and explode. In the eerie silence of the room, I could practically hear the sound of old memories ripping their way through her face. I stood back and watched. (p. 8)

As Mai's words suggest, Thanh's apparent occupation with the past continues to influence her in the present with frustration and nostalgia for the old times, leading her to isolate herself

from social life. Her present depressive mood is later contrasted by Mai with her past state when she was a livelier person. To emphasize how her mother was an able person in the past who cared for all the family members, Mai states that "she carried the outdoors and indoors with her . . . my mother had been the cause of many things" (p. 137). In another paragraph she expresses: "The solid geometry of my mother's life had always provided me with comfort and sanctuary" (p. 137). However, in her present situation, Thanh is not able to give the protection and warmth that Mai desperately expects from her mother. In parallel with Freud's statements that the melancholic do not take the nourishment they need, Thanh does not have an appetite for food which makes her really fragile. Because of her situation, the relationship between mother and child is reversed in that, rather than Mai, Thanh becomes the one who needs caring. Mai states that "she looked like a chicken bone inside my hand. Here was my mooring, this woman I called my mother, curled like a sick child in the half-light of her curtained room" (p. 138). Thus, Thanh's melancholic state is also reflected through her weak body.

Apart from her refusal to eat, Thanh also isolates herself from the outside world, which for Freud, is another aspect of the melancholic state. Herman (1992) also argues that traumatized people have constricted lives, and their relationships with their family members deteriorate (p. 52). In that respect, for a long period of time, Thanh isolates herself in her room and prefers staying in darkness with curtains of the rooms pulled. When Mai comes home from school, she finds that the doors are locked and even the blinds of the apartment are sealed from the outside. She finds her mother lying on the bed in the darkness, which leads Mai to associate her mother's stillness with the stillness of a corpse. Mai thinks it is urgent to bring her mother to a normal psychological state but her repetitive efforts to make her mother active in these situations do not find any response from Thanh. Mai comments on these situations stating that "a sense of distance and remoteness had attached to her body, and it was at moments like those that I understood the true meaning of absence. The desperate attempts to reach her" (p. 134). In spite of all the attempts by Mai to help her mother recover, Thanh's melancholic situation becomes more serious and unsolvable. In parallel with Freud's idea that the serious form of melancholia leads to the weakening of the life instinct, Thanh commits suicide towards the end of the novel.

The outcome of traumatic loss as a melancholic state also occurs in *The Lotus and the Storm* which leads to disruption of family bonds and isolation of characters from each other. Mai's and her father Minh's narrative demonstrate the effect of loss on the family

members from their own perspectives. The melancholia stemming from the traumatic loss does not only affect the individuals during their lives in Vietnam but also continues having its impact in the U.S. After the sudden death of her sister Khanh, Mai describes the melancholic state of her mother Quy in these words:

> It might be purely my imagination, but I believe mother is undergoing a transformation. Still, emanating from her room is the usual sullen and accusatory quiet that seals her from the world beyond . . . as I try to fall asleep, I'm startled by the sound of an unconcealed cry. I listen. It does not get louder as I lie there listening, and soon it fades. (pp.142-143)

The mother's transformation is a direct result of the loss of her daughter, which leads her to isolate herself similar to the mother figure in *Monkey Bridge*. Her grief for her lost child causes her to cut the connection with Mai and Minh as Mai states that she gradually becomes "more remote now than before" and rejects any consolation from the other people (p. 110). This is also a state that Herman explains as an outcome of a traumatic situation after which the person feels "indifference and emotional detachment" from others and leaves all the struggles choosing a life of passivity (p. 43). Thus, Quy loses her emotional intimacy towards her husband and daughter and becomes fixated on her lost daughter. Minh describes his wife's cutting connection with the family as a rejection of being touched and preferring a life of separateness (p. 168). Minh also expresses the importance of family relations in Vietnamese culture to draw attention to the serious impact of traumatic loss that disintegrates these relations through unresolved melancholia.

For Freud (1917), one of the aspects of the melancholic situation is the accusation towards self as the person accuses herself/himself for the loss of the loved ones (p. 246) After a traumatic event which results in the loss of loved ones, this self-accusation occurs as a symptom for the trauma survivors who feel shame and guilt for their survival among many losses. According to Petra G. Aartz and Wybrand Op den Velde (1996) this survivor guilt is especially observed among the Holocaust survivors who lose their self-esteem. Their inability to mourn after the losses because of their trauma leads to self-accusation and even sometimes makes them think that "they were almost as bad as their prosecutors" (p. 371). According to Herman (1992), the feeling of guilt rises to extreme levels when the victims of trauma witness the death of other people, especially if those people are family members (p. 54). To explain the reason for the feeling of guilt, Herman expresses that

> [t]o be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience. Survivors of disaster and war are haunted by images of the dying whom they could not rescue. They feel guilty for not risking their lives to save others. (p. 54)

In the novel, the accusation also stems from the idea that Mai's sister Khanh could have been saved if the right action had been taken by both parents. In that respect, the accusation is not only towards the self but also towards one another. Quy's self-accusation is sometimes witnessed by Mai when her mother thinks she is alone and isolated from others. At these moments, Quy's emotional numbness turns into a discharge of emotions. In one of these situations, Mai witnesses her mother speaking and crying, accusing herself as Mai states "'forgive me, forgive me' she says importunately, over and over. 'If only I hadn't asked you to stop and get into the car' I hear the murmur of voices take on a different tone, a tone that beseeches" (p. 107). Quy accuses herself because she thinks that if she had not taken her daughter into her car and let her play outside, she would have prevented her death. Instead of the perpetrators, she accuses herself of the child's death although they were just following the routines of the day. Because of her accusatory thought towards the self, she is unable to mourn for her loss which gradually becomes more serious, leading her to consume alcohol to ease her pain, which is described by Mai as her new habit.

Due to the traumatic loss of the daughter, the relationship between Minh and Quy worsen since they also accuse each other of their daughter's loss. At nights, Mai listens to them from her room and witnesses their fights and anger towards each other. During the day, when they are together, the communication between Minh and Quy is limited only to performing domestic activities in the house. Mai expresses: "When they talk to each other in my presence, they say only what is obvious. Our mother drops her eyes when she talks" when they are sitting at the dinner table and "his eyes momentarily look at hers and then fix themselves on his rice bowl" (p. 108). Their disconnection from each other becomes the new normal in that Mai gets used to the new situation as she states "I have become used to our father's porcelain gaze, our mother's discreet sorrow, the implosion of melancholy within" (p. 111). Although they try not to fight in Mai's presence, Minh's narrative gives more details about their accusations of each other. Minh expresses that

> I was not myself after she died. For surely senseless reasons, I sharpened the hooks and snares I did not even know I had and flashed them at my wife. Through silent tears, coldness overtook us. A form of vengeful counter speech took over. Instead of comforting words, there were cruel accusations. The urge was to pull everything down, even if it collapsed. 'Why?' Not *why did this happen to us?* but *why did you let it happen?* I tortured my wife with a question that provided entry into pain itself. Days after Khanh's death, I reveled in power to accuse and to judge. A mother, more than anyone, is supposed to protect her children . . . My wife in turn asked me the one question that still haunts me to this day. 'Have you ever thought that the bullet was meant for you? My brother warned you' . . . I

> knew how to wield a knife. I wanted to brandish it against the mother who failed to protect her child . . . Neither I nor my wife ever fully recovered from this disreputable feeling to hurt. (p. 167)

As Minh's narrative suggests, both he and Quy are filled with rage directed at their own selves and at each other. The traumatic loss leads them to have the survivor guilt as Minh thinks that they could have prevented the death of their daughter if they had taken the right actions. His wife's statement that the attackers were actually looking for him and killed his daughter instead increases the pain he feels because it strengthens the accusatory belief that he should have died instead of the innocent daughter. Their accusations are also never directed at the perpetrators of the attack; on the contrary, Minh reveals the extremity of his anger with the urge to hurt his wife.

Consequently, rather than a process of mourning after which the mourner becomes detached from the 'loved object' and becomes free of it, the above-mentioned characters in both novels do not successfully accomplish this process and become fixated on and attached to their traumatic loss. Instead of an adapting process to the needs of the present time, these characters are constantly haunted by their traumatic losses and the resulting feeling of guilt at the present time. This inability to mourn and the feeling of guilt lead to some symptoms such as emotional outburst, inability to sleep and having nightmares, isolating themselves from the others and disruption of relations with family members.

Although the encounter with the traumatic situation and witnessing the death of loved ones have adverse effects on the individual psyche, the effect of trauma in both novels cannot be isolated from the cultural and social contexts which influence the meanings attached to the traumatic experiences. In this respect, the effect the of the Vietnamese culture and the position of being refugees influence the present lives of the victims while handling their trauma.

An important reason for the trauma in *Monkey Bridge* is the loss of ancestral lands which have an important place in traditional Vietnamese culture. Living in the ancestral lands and being close to ancestral burial grounds are considered indispensable for a person's soul to be together with the dead relatives and ancestors, or, in other words, with their roots, which is the only way for the soul to find peace after the person dies. To emphasize the importance of ancestors in Vietnamese culture, Linda Hitchox (1990) expresses that

> [t]he superhuman powers of the ancestral dead may affect the living family member for good or ill. Thus, it is doubly important that they are remembered and propitiated. Vietnamese commonly state that attention and respect for the ancestors coupled with a strong sense of filial duty is moral and

> necessary behavior regardless of what other religious beliefs they hold. Ancestor worship united two vital principles in traditional Vietnamese society, firstly the holding of inherited land that is the main source of wealth, and secondly belonging to a family, the foundation and origin of one's existence. (pp. 33-34)

In that respect, being away from ancestral lands makes it impossible for the person to be with dead family members and ancestors which is a vital part of Vietnamese culture. As such, in the novel, separation from these ancestral lands also contributes to the trauma of the characters.

In *Monkey Bridge*, the importance of ancestral lands is conveyed through the betel-nut story which is a myth about three people who leave their homeland and eventually lose their souls and die. As a result, they turn into an areca tree with betel-nuts which is an important plant in Vietnamese culture symbolizing the loyalty to ancestors and ancestral lands. For this reason, being away from their home-land, especially from the burial grounds, has traumatic consequences for the Vietnamese people in the novel. An example of the trauma of loss of ancestral land is demonstrated in Thanh's narrative when she gives details about what happened to their village in the rural areas of Vietnam and its effects on the local community.

When Mai leaves Vietnam, Thanh returns to their village for a while to live with her family. However, after a while, the village turns into a battleground and all the villagers are evacuated to some areas called 'strategic hamlets.' The effect of this move from the village and burial ground is narrated by Thanh as follows:

> Once we relinquished the village earth from the tips of our fingers and felt its absence as we crossed the village border into an exterior world none of us could comprehend, we became, in palpable way, a people who were neither alive nor dead. Your grandmother believed we had indeed lost our souls. (p. 233)

Since, for the Vietnamese, loss of homeland and burial ground is a disruption of the connection between the villagers and the ancestors, it creates a traumatic effect on the community. So as to point out the psychological impacts of dislocation from homeland on the Vietnamese people, Linda Hitchcox (1990) gives the results of a survey carried out in 1977. The results of the survey demonstrate that the people who were forcibly displaced and resettled in 'strategic hamlets' showed emotional disturbance and their stress level was "comparable to those measured from a group of prisoners of war" (p. 33). In the novel, the effect of this loss of the ancestral land is especially felt by the elders of the village who are

extremely bound to their lands. The tragic ending of the betel-nut myth is frequently remembered by those people which is why they are afraid of losing their souls and being unable to rejoin their loved ones. As a result, Thanh's mother cannot endure the pain of being away from her village and eventually dies. For her sudden death, Thanh states that "although she had been in good physical health, her death, our barracks neighbors proclaimed, could not have been avoided" (p. 247). The psychological state of other people and her mother's death also indicate how cultural beliefs strengthen the effect of trauma.

Thanh believes that the only way for her mother's soul to find peace is to take her dead body to the burial ground in the village. She thinks that is the only way to preserve her mother's soul "to nurture it back to the land of its birth before it could make the move into a non-earthly, everlasting peace" (p. 247). The urge to take the mother's body to that place is so strong that she does not care about the dangers she might come across, since this is also the only way for her to mourn after her loss as a part of her cultural and religious belief. She expresses her resolution by stating that

> [e]ven though our village had been declared a free-fire zone, which meant that any moving thing caught in its vicinity could and would be shot, I knew I would have to find a way back there, back to the graves of my ancestors, back to the sacred land where my mother's placenta and umbilical cord had been buried and where her body would have to be buried as well . . . I would have to construct this circle for her, a beginning and an end that converged toward and occupied one single concentrated space. (p. 248)

Hence, Thanh's motivation behind burying her mother in the family burial ground is a result of her strong belief in the regeneration of the dead body. Anything that prevents her from accomplishing that objective can be a catastrophe for her because, instead of being an individual desire, this practice is believed to be a part of an important cultural requirement. Consequently, her inability to accomplish this important task and losing the body at the moment of the bombing contribute to her trauma as she believes that her mother's soul is wandering in that area where she has left her.

Another aspect of Thanh's trauma is her belief in karma which she thinks has a strong effect on the traumatic events in the past and which will also affect her and her daughter's future. In Thanh's perspective, "karma means there is always going to be something you'll have to inherit" (p.20) from the doings of the ancestors and elder family members. She believes that karma is not unlike the genetics of modern science that her daughter studies. On the contrary, they are "intertwined two strands of thread from the same tapestry" (pp. 169-170). As such, similar to genetic inheritance, the later generations inherit "the parent's karmic history" (p. 70). Cao also expresses the belief in the passing of the results of actions

onto next generations in Vietnamese culture in her memoir. She (2020) states that "we know that our own lives are linked to those of our parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents, and their stories are bequests that are passed down from one generation to the next. Family karma is almost like DNA" (Cao & Cao, p. 66). Because of this belief, Isabel Pelaud (2011) asserts that believing in karma "contrasts sharply with the American belief in free will" (p. 76). In this respect, it becomes hard to escape from the karmic results of what the old generations have done. Thanh believes that the traumas they have experienced are actually consequences of past sins committed by the Vietnamese ancestors and her family's private sins. Although she is aware of the fact that the American intervention has contributed to the traumatic situation of the Vietnamese people, she also accuses the military invasions of the Vietnamese ancestors. For her, their expansion towards the south in the past by slaughtering the native people of the area is another reason for the present situation. Their actions ignited a bad karma which passed onto many following generations and eventually resulted in the War. As Thanh writes,

> [n]o one can escape the laws of Karma. Nor can a country divest itself of the karmic consequences of its own actions . . . For every action there is a reaction, for every deed of destruction there is a consequence. It's something as exact and implacable as the laws of physics . . . Karma is based less on rights and entitlements than on moral duty and obligation, less on celebration of victories than on repentance and atonement. (*MB*, pp. 55-56)

For Thanh, this collective sin by ancestors also becomes multilayered by the sins that her family has committed. After Thanh's mother reveals that her real father is Uncle Khanh, Thanh associates her five miscarriages and her other traumatic experiences with bad karma since she considers herself as a product of sin. She believes that she carries the bad karma in her body, and it will be transferred to her daughter. She states: "And that is what I fear. I fear our family history of sin, revenge and murder and the imprints it creates in our children's lives as it rips through one generation and tears apart the next" (p. 252). Thus, she fears that the sins of the family and the Vietnamese ancestors may also ruin Mai's life in the U.S.

Considering Thanh's melancholia and silence about past events through these statements sheds light on her trauma for a better understanding. Thanh's silence against Mai's questions do not stem from the traditional idea that trauma is unspeakable and unpresentable, leading to the victim's silence. On the contrary, her diary and suicide letter reveal that she has vivid recollections of the events. In other words, her silence is to protect Mai from past sins because she is afraid of the karmic consequences of the events, which demonstrate the importance of cultural context to understand her trauma.

The belief in karma as an important factor for the traumatic situation is also present in Minh's narrative in *The Lotus and the Storm*. In his narrative, as an educated and high-ranking army member, Minh does not present the traumatic situations by isolating them from political and social conditions. However, he does not separate these explanations from the traditional belief in karma, either. In that respect, his narrative goes back to 1963, to the year when, he assumes, the political mistakes in South Vietnam caused bad karma leading to the catastrophe. Minh gives details about how the Buddhist majority in South Vietnam became frustrated by the political decisions of the president Ngo Dinh Diem who was a Catholic and an authoritarian ruler, oppressive towards other religious groups. His unpopularity among the people led to a coup d'état which is considered by Minh as an act that changed the collective fate of all Vietnamese people as everything changed from that time on (p. 27). Although after the murder of the ex-president, the unrest seemed to come to an end, for Minh, "something had changed irreversibly" and a traumatic future was lying ahead for them in the horizon (p. 34). This traumatic future was supposedly the result of the bad karma.

In his later accounts of the events, Minh gives more details about the karmic belief in the Vietnamese culture and how this belief shapes the connection between the range of different events such as the death of John F. Kennedy a short period after the Vietnamese president Diem's murder. Minh expresses: "Only a Vietnamese would shudder at the sequence of these two events and understand their spine clicking effect" (p. 91). He describes how the coup plotters feared that their actions would return to them with bad results. According to Minh,

> it was simply a matter of karma, after all, and the genetic instructions it carries. This possibility had to be acknowledged, the sowing and tilting of karma. How could they prevent others from doing to them what they had done to others? . . . Of course, the ghosts of the dead president and his brother continued to haunt the junta generals . . . In a country such as Vietnam, we understand karma. We have all travelled its path, felt its key points, feared its whiplash. We go to great lengths to slip free of the psychological convulsions that come from fearing its wreath. (p. 91)

As Minh states, the belief in karma is very strong among the Vietnamese people in general and the following events are explained as karmic consequences of the misdeeds of the political leaders and the army. For Minh, after all these mistakes and bad karma, the country starts to transform into a chaotic place which leads to the American intervention and later events.

Another example of an interpretation of trauma from the cultural perspective in *The Lotus and the Storm* is the belief in spirit possession. Studies carried out in some Asian and African countries demonstrate that instead of explaining the traumatic symptoms, such as

dissociative disorders as part of psychological disorders, the traditional belief is that the people who show the symptoms of trauma are possessed by spirits (Hecker, et al., 2016, p. 469). According to Janice Boddy (1996), spirit possession generally alludes to the control employed on an individual by an entity which is considered to be more powerful (p. 407). She states that

> [t]hese forces may be ancestors or divinities, ghosts of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien . . . Depending on cultural and etiological context such spirits may be exorcised, or lodged in relatively permanent relationship with their host, occasionally usurping primacy of place in her body during bouts of possession trance. (p. 407)

Hence, even though an individual's psychic mechanisms are sometimes unable to assimilate the traumatic experiences and demonstrate symptoms of dissociation afterwards, some cultural interpretations explain these symptoms as signs of spirit possession. This perspective even influences the victims' attitude towards their own selves as they also believe in being possessed by spirits.

In the novel, after Mai's symptoms of dissociative disorder become frequent and she loses her speaking ability for a period of time, people in their community think that she is possessed by spirits. The first person who thinks that Mai is possessed is her school teacher as she observes that Mai is occasionally shifting to her other personalities. The teacher's claim that Mai is possessed has a strong influence on Mai's nursemaid, and the first thing she does is to wash Mai's body with hot water which is believed to wipe the bad spirits away. Cleaning Mai does not seem to be enough for the family and they find a shaman to cure her.

In Vietnamese culture, the shaman, who is called '*thay phap,*' has healing powers on the victim and has the ability to drag all the spirits into his own body to release the person from the pressure of possession. Unaware of the reason for her traumatic condition as a mental problem and accepting that she is possessed, Mai states that "as long as there is a chance that I can be fixed, I am willing to cooperate" (p. 118). After some rituals which include burning incense and dancing, the shaman explains Mai' condition as being possessed by angry souls. He states that "perhaps they have been wronged sometime, somewhere. Perhaps they had difficult lives. They will have their ups and downs, their moods . . . They are homeless . . . and tired of wandering and are merely looking for a place to stay" (p. 189) The assumption that the souls are wandering and looking for an appropriate place is similar to the belief in *Monkey Bridge* where Thanh's trauma is partly caused by her belief that her mother's soul is wandering in the delta as she was not buried properly. When the shaman asks whether they have lost somebody in the family in recent times, they become startled.

Mai expresses: “My parents freeze in a quiet fury. A strange sensation prickles my skin and excites inchoate images inside my head” (*TLTS*, p. 189). They believe that Mai is possessed by her sister’s soul whose sudden and traumatic death hinders her soul to rest in peace and is considered to exercise control over Mai with all the rage and anger since she was not saved. As such, rather than a scientific attitude towards her dissociated states, cultural interpretation of trauma causes different explanations.

It is evident that Lan Cao does not present the traumatic experiences of the War as isolated from the cultural context. Although the individual receptions of trauma are important and the victims clearly show some symptoms which are explained by traditional trauma studies, the culture the victims live in presents a new perspective to understand how traumatic events and their outcomes impact the victims. An analysis which ignores the significance of the cultural interpretations of trauma by the victims would be incomplete in order to fully understand the impacts of trauma on these people.

In both novels, although the stories seem to be centered on individual trauma, in the background, Cao demonstrates the impacts of trauma on a collective level with reference to multiple experiences of other people. According to Michelle Balaev (2012), “the trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet the protagonist may also function to represent an event that was experienced by a group of people” (p. 17). In that respect, in the novels, although the trauma is presented through individual sufferings, these experiences are connected to collective experiences. In order to express how trauma fiction can present the protagonist as an “everyperson” figure who represents the collective experiences, Balaev states that

> significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race, or gender have collectively experienced trauma. In this regard, the fictional figure magnifies a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence, such as slavery, war, torture, rape, natural disaster, or nuclear devastation. (p. 17)

The historical event in both novels is the Vietnam War, and the individuals who go through the atrocities of the War are connected to each other through their private but similar stories. Similar to Kai Erikson’s description of collective trauma which “damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (p160), in both novels, the effects of the War on the collective level are portrayed as the disruption of the social bonds, dispersal of huge numbers of people, mass graves and deaths while people are trying to save their lives.

Both novels give descriptions of the numbers of South Vietnamese people trying to escape the country of origin and their refugee experiences in the current country they have immigrated to where they expose stories about their traumas. The historical name for the survivors who escaped from Vietnam is "the boat people" which refers to the Vietnamese escaping in huge numbers by boats in the South China Sea. In his book about the Vietnam War, Sucheng Chan (2006) describes the chaotic situation of a huge number of people who were trying to escape by the American planes and boats for fear of being murdered by their enemies. During the day of the 'fall of Saigon,' "more than one hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese managed to escape before North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon. Over seventy-three thousands of them did so by sea" (p. 63). The movement of people after the fall does not stop and continues in high numbers in later years. According to Linda Hitchcox (1990), between 1976 and 1979 the journey of refugees became more dangerous as the people who fled by boat at those times "faced a hazardous crossing in small and under-equipped craft, which were liable to attacks by pirates . . . It is estimated that between 40.000 and 150.000 people lost their lives at sea during this period" (p. 72). Chan (2006) describes the situation in these words: "Some boats with broken engines drifted for weeks as people on board died of thirst and hunger. Most of the women faced the possibility of being raped by pirates. This was the price they had to pay for freedom" (p. 201). Thus, the traumatic experiences of the individuals are actually parts of an event that affects the whole community collectively.

Both novels have descriptions of the experiences of the people escaping Vietnam and trying to adapt to their new country. In *The Lotus and the Storm*, Mai and her father are among the crowds that are being evacuated by helicopters before Saigon is captured. Her narrative chapter is named 'Exodus,' associating the number of escaping people with the historical and collective traumas of Jewish people. Similar to the Jewish departure from their homeland Egypt, the Vietnamese people are leaving their country, the loss of which will be felt through melancholic and nostalgic memories in 'Little Saigon' in the U.S. Mai describes their final escape with emphasis on the loss of homeland. She states: "The country has fallen. Peace has come but Saigon lost" (p. 245). Mai continues to describe the people leaving Vietnam during the two years' period between 1975 and 1978 to reach other countries.

> They are called the boat people. It is because they flee from Vietnam's coast by boat. Their very essence is aptly distilled by two simple, sorrow-filled words. It is 1978. The world is taking note of these people who willingly set their bodies upon the wide-open sea in the hope of reaching some distant, kindly shore . . . The Chinese are fleeing, along with Vietnamese of all stripes, including

> former soldiers, farmers, peasants, and traders, carrying nothing with them but hope and grievances . . . By 1978, more than half a million people have fled. (pp. 258-260)

Thus, the people leaving Vietnam are not one single class or ethnicity as the war affects all the people collectively, and their experiences are connected to one another. Their conditions as immigrants trying to save their lives bond them together regardless of their diverse backgrounds. When Mai watches the news and sees the pictures showing the journey of 'the boat people,' she is both concerned and hopeful as she thinks that her mother who stayed in Vietnam might be among these survivors. Similar to Mai, nearly all the people in the 'Little Saigon' community in the U.S anticipate the news about their relatives and loved ones. Mai states "that is why we wait. It is our community ritual. It is 1978 and everyone in Virginia's Little Saigon waits or knows someone who is waiting" (p. 292). The victims who manage to arrive in the U.S. bring news about the other people left behind and the traumatic experiences during their journey. For instance, a woman tells a story about the attack by pirates who raped the women on the boat and murdered some of the people (p. 276). Later in the novel, Mai learns that her mother was also raped and murdered like the other thousands of people who died on their journey. Thus, her trauma becomes connected to other people's traumas through their stories which include similar experiences.

In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai having arrived in the U.S. just before the South Vietnam falls watches the news about the people escaping the country in 1975 and emphasizes the number of people leaving the country in despair. She states that

> [a] newscaster reporting for ABC News had declared with eerie matter of factness that this was 'the largest single movement of people in the history of America itself' There was the South China Sea on April 30, 1975. There was the exodus by air […] There was the exodus by sea, a lurching protuberance of South Vietnamese Navy vessels, barges, thug boats, junks, sampans, fishing boats. (p. 167)

The description of the people in the news indicates that people are caught unprepared and try to escape by whatever means they could find. In that sense, 'the fall' creates a collective shock on people, and the fear of being murdered contributes to the number of people escaping. Mai also emphasizes that this escape does not always end happily as "at least two hundred thousand had died at sea" (p. 214). Similar to *The Lotus and the Storm*, Mai's narrative also includes a story of a person who tells a story about a tragic boat journey that resulted in the rape of his sister, his mother's death and father's loss at the South China Sea. Apparently, the similarity of the traumatic stories by different people in both novels is designed intentionally by Cao to highlight the nature of these events as parts of collective traumas experienced by South Vietnamese war survivors.

In *Monkey Bridge,* Cao also draws attention to the situation of the Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S. who seem to be marginalized. Although for trauma scholars, it is important to voice the traumatic experiences in order to gain visibility and thus bind up the wounds (Herman, p. 1), the Vietnamese refugees and their experiences are left to be forgotten. When Mai wants to learn about the similar experiences of the people and search for more information in the library in the U.S. she does not find anything about these people. She feels that it is as if the world is trying to forget these unpleasant memories. She states that "it was only four years since the war ended, and there was nothing about Vietnam after April 30, 1975, and nothing about my current preoccupation, the boat people and their methods of escape" (p. 216). Absence of information about the experiences of Vietnamese people demonstrates the policy of the U.S. to erase historical events related to civilian sufferings in the War. Mai explains the ignorance by saying that "Americans hate losers, I wanted to say, they don't want to have anything to do with us. They are not trying to win the war; they're trying to forget it" (p. 153). Besides, the historical facts and the novels indicate that the Vietnamese are not readily welcomed in the host country. According to Zia Rizvi (1984), "[o]nce an individual, a human being, becomes a refugee, it is as though he had become a member of another race, some other sub-human group" (qtd. in Harrell Bond & Kagan, 2005, p.193). Thus, the refugees are not respected by the citizens of the host country and are faced with bad rumors stemming from the bias towards them.

In *Monkey Bridge* the demonization of the Vietnamese is demonstrated through tensions in a neighborhood and attacks on refugees as a result of the false news about "how a Vietnamese family had been suspected of eating an old neighbor's dog" (p. 88). Rather than being considered victims and survivors of a war who need help to heal their wounds, the Vietnamese are considered "a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, and awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget" (*MB*, p. 15). For all these reasons, their war trauma does not find resolution when they arrive in the U.S. because discrimination and marginalization contribute to their precarious situation.

All in all, it can be claimed that Lan Cao does not present the effects of trauma from a unidimensional point of view. In some cases, the experiences of the characters related to the traumatic situations are portrayed within the traditional perspective of trauma by concentrating on the impacts of the events on the individuals' mental condition. However, by giving place to the different narratives of characters in both novels, Cao also underlines the multiplicity of the responses by the victims to the traumatic events. Besides, Cao's novels

also voice the cultural and social contexts, and collective aspects of the traumatic experiences which provide an analysis of these novels from a non-traditional and non-Western perspective, because rather than an individual experience isolated from cultural and historical contexts, the sufferers' traumas are layered by the cultural meanings attached to their traumas and their collective displacement from the homeland.

CHAPTER 2

HEALING THE WOUNDS IN

MONKEY BRIDGE AND *THE LOTUS AND THE STORM*

Similar to the diversity of post-traumatic symptoms and responses to the traumatizing situations by the victims of trauma which continue to influence their present life, Lan Cao also presents multiple actions taken by these characters at individual and collective levels to ease their pain and pave a way for their possible healing. Neither of Cao's novels offers a clear-cut or ultimate solution for the traumatized individuals which would bring an end to their suffering and result in a complete healing. In that sense, both novels have examples of various efforts by traumatized individuals going through different stages of healing which may or may not lead to full recovery. In that respect Dominic La Capra (2001) argues that "when [traumas] are worked through, this does not mean that they may not recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again" (p. 148). In parallel with La Capra's statement, Kate Schick (2011) observes that working through a trauma "is not a linear process . . . on the contrary, the process of working through is complex and is never tidily resolved" (p. 1847). However, by portraying characters who undertake multiple actions in order to find solace, the novels suggest that no matter what the result is, their efforts demonstrate that trauma survivors are not just passive victims constantly in a pathological state, in contrast, they are actually able to rely on their individual agency and create situations that contribute to their potential recovery. The search for finding peace and getting away from the traumatizing past is sometimes carried out through individual efforts and at other times by coming together and forming connections with other trauma survivors. Consequently, rather than searching for a remedy which results in a complete healing, in this chapter, this thesis examines the multiple paths taken by the trauma survivors in both novels and the outcomes of their efforts on their potential recovery.

In *Monkey Bridge*, an example of coping with trauma at the present time foregrounds the positive images in the individual's past rather than concentrating on the traumatizing experiences through writing. Writing becomes a survival strategy that enables the victim to modify and reconstruct the past in an imaginary way in order to avoid the constant imposition of traumatizing memories in the present. In trauma studies, various forms of writing about

the past, such as writing about real events, fictional reconstructions and accounts of personal experiences, are considered important instruments in the path for recovery. To emphasize how narratives in fictional forms or memoirs hasten the working through process, Clara Mucci (2013) states that writing can become a site at "the service of healing" as the narratives "mend the tears and give voice to silence" (p. 227). Sandra Morinella (2017) also expresses the importance of writing about the past to find solace. She states that

> [w]e cannot change the reality of what happens to us. If your father molested you or your child was hit by a drunk driver, this event happened. We cannot deny what we experienced, but eventually we can stop a shattered story from running on replay in our brains. We can edit and even rewrite these painful episodes. (p. 141)

While in traditional trauma studies recollection of the events and their utterance in words are considered crucial in order to face the atrocities experienced and, thus, to recover, Morinella further suggests rewriting and editing painful memories in order to stop their constant intrusion into the present lives of trauma victims. The importance of editing or sometimes reconstructing traumatizing memories with more positive scenarios is also underlined by van der Kolk and van der Hart (1991) who give examples from the clinical studies and treatment of Holocaust victims. They note that "one contemporary therapist of a Holocaust survivor had the patient imagine a flower growing in the assignment place in Auschwitz—an image which gave him tremendous comfort" (p. 450). Thus, similar to the re-writing and editing of the events, van der Kolk and van der Hart suggest that the horrors of the past can be reconstructed through more positive images and alternative scenarios in order to relieve the victims of trauma.

In *Monkey Bridge,* the reconstruction of the past free from the traumatic experiences is performed by Thanh whose diary enables her to take a different perspective towards the rural life in Vietnam. Rather than revolving around the traumatic experiences, Thanh uses her diary to focus on the daily lives of Vietnamese people in the rural Mekong Delta with positive images. In that respect, writing the diary gives Thanh an opportunity to ease her burden by forming an alternative past freed from trauma. Keeping a diary is a common practice by people in serious conditions. For example, many soldiers strategically write diaries including happy moments in their lives in order to endure a traumatic situation in times of war. Sandra Marinella (2017) includes examples of poems and other fictional entries in the diaries of the soldiers who have gone through traumatic situations in a war and live with PTSD. One soldier states that

> [t]his world still seems strange to me, I wanted to talk with you because I wanted others to know that when you are out there, writing can help. I still struggle with PTSD… with all of it. I am still looking

> for the enemy. But I can tell you, when I was out there — in the middle of a war — the writing helped take the unseen monkey off my back. (p. 183)

Evidently, for the soldiers who are exposed to the atrocities of war, writing diaries helps them momentarily to forget the outside reality and keeps them moving on. Other examples of writing fictional and autobiographical diaries to reduce the stress of traumatic experiences can be seen among Holocaust victims. According to Amos Goldberg (2017) "diaries written during the Holocaust are a kind of battlefield on which the writers seek to reconstitute their words, if only at first, around the lack, in order to enclose it and try to limit its harm and exposure" (p. 248). Similar to Marinella, Amos also exemplifies his argument with Anais Nin's, a holocaust survivor's, remarks on the power of writing diaries and other fictional narratives to cope with trauma. Believing that she has recovered from trauma, Nin states that "stories are the only enchantment possible, for when we begin to see our suffering as a story, we are saved" (qtd. in Goldberg, p. 247). In a similar way, although she is not writing in the middle of an event but still under its influence, writing retrospectively helps Thanh to relieve her trauma. Hence, considering the power of writing as a victim's strategy to cope with trauma enables a broader perspective for Thanh's writing practice.

In contrast to Mai's description of her mother as a patient in a pathological state who, Mai thinks, sometimes behaves abnormally (p. 11) and has a "fragile sanity" (p. 24), her discovery of the diary demonstrates that Thanh's mental condition is not as pathological as Mai assumes. Thanh begins her diary by commenting on Mai's desire to assimilate herself into the American life and states that she is "under an illusion of freedom" (p. 169) in the U.S. She believes that Mai's lack of knowledge about the rural life in Vietnam and the traditional beliefs and myths of the Vietnamese can actually lead Mai to lose her way in the U.S. Thus, at first, she seems to use her diary as an instrument to inform Mai about the beauties of their homeland; however, in the later parts of the diary, it becomes clear that she also seeks her own recovery through fictional reconstructions. As Balaev (2012) states, her journal entries are actually parts of her imaginative act to survive in the present as she tries to

> reformulate identity and create a carefully controlled relation with her daughter based on a past without trauma. Revising the past in her journal is an imaginative effort of the mind to change the karmic cycle she believes is at work in her life. (p. 49)

Consequently, rather than concentrating on their new lives in the U.S., Thanh imaginatively returns to pre-war Vietnam both as a coping mechanism for her situation and as a guide for Mai to learn about her culture which she thinks is an indispensable part of one's identity.

Because of her motivation to cope with trauma and to protect Mai from the assumed karmic cycles, she leaves out the overwhelming events and writes about positive moments of her life and her family history. Although Mai thinks that the diary is meant to be hidden from her, Thanh's suicide letter addressed to her daughter reveals Thanh's intention to leave it to Mai. In the letter, she expresses that throughout the diary she tried to create a different version of the actual events in order to ease her own pain. She notes

> [b]y the time you read this, you will have discovered the truth about your mother's life. You will have discovered that, like the monsoon that brushes through last season's fields and obliterates the landscape beneath a sea of foam, I too have tried to extinguish the imprints of my life and create alternative versions that suit my imagination and heal my soul. The new world that I tried to create is the world I left in a drawer for you to find, the world I wished I could have handed to you as the unhidden truth of a mother's life. (p. 227)

Thanh's words clearly demonstrate that she practiced the diary writing to make it easier for herself to forget the traumatizing realities of the past, sometimes by creating an alternative version of the events and, at other times, by selecting positive images from her life in Vietnam rather than focusing on the dreadful experiences.

Thanh's diary is an account of her and her family's life story which begins with her mother's childhood and her marriage to Baba Quan in a traditional ceremony in the Mekong Delta. Later in the diary, she narrates her birth, her happy years in the village, and her marriage. In parallel with the family history and daily life, Thanh mentions traditional beliefs of the local people, such as the betel-nut story and myths based on the victories of the Vietnamese ancestors against other nations. Her narrative also includes her semi-adoption by a rich landlord called Uncle Khan in the village, a man who is thought to be so powerful that people believe he "could bring the sun and the moon together" (p. 175) but whose wife had a "series of miscarriages" (p. 175). Instead of considering her adoption as a terrible act committed by her family, Thanh states that she was happy because it brought a prosperous life to her and her family.

As such, rather than focusing on the sequence of the traumatic events which resulted in the deaths of family members and departure from the native land, Thanh revisits the past from a more idealized perspective. It is only in the final suicide letter in which Thanh reveals the real identity of Baba Quan as someone who enters into an agreement with the rich landlord allowing him to have sexual affairs with his wife in return for the economic advantages in the village. Besides, Thanh reveals that she is not Baba Quan's daughter but the rich landlord's as a result of that sexual relationship igniting the bad karma that is still at

work in her life. As a result, Baba Quan falls into depression, becomes alcoholic and pays little attention to the work the family carries out in the rice fields. He becomes a member of the Viet-Cong and kills Uncle Khan in the graveyard which to Thanh is an act continuing to haunt her until the present day.

In spite of all these realities, in the alternative scenario in Thanh's diary, Baba Quan's portrayal is in striking contrast with the figure mentioned in the letter. Instead of a depressed and enraged figure who becomes consumed by taking revenge and, thus, turns out to be a member of the Viet-Cong, Thanh's diary portrays Baba Quan as a wise old man who represents an ideal peasant figure loyal to the ancestral lands. He conducts ceremonial activities with the sacred betel nuts, betel leaves and lime paste before the weddings which are considered as the symbol of "everlasting fidelity and love" (p. 49). He gives advice about the way of life that the villagers should lead which is to "follow the straight and precise line of life that favors patience over passion" (p. 173). He is also presented as a hero who saves the lives of the soldiers in the American special unit by finding the booby traps through his sharp senses. Thanh characterizes him as a devoted husband and an affectionate father who cares for the family. She writes about delightful moments of her life spent with him. She states

> [h]e would roam the house as a water buffalo and I . . . would ride him tall and upright, nudging his belly with my heels, once, twice, three times to command him to stop, or clasping my knees hard against his ribs to order him into a quick trot . . . I could feel the muscles on his back struggle as we made our sixth circle around the house, he would submit to my orders with the tenderness of someone who aims only to please. (p. 174)

Thus, rather than focusing on the traumatizing truth about Baba Quan, Thanh chooses to create a profile that suits her soothing imagination. She expresses her desire in her suicide letter in these words: "That was the nature of my longing, and so he was all that and more in my fictional re-imaginings" (p. 229). By doing so, she portrays an alternative father figure for both herself and her daughter, which functions as a control mechanism over her familial trauma.

Apart from an optimistic version of the past life and an idealistic father figure, Thanh's journal is also filled with vivid descriptions of the rural landscape. Similar to her narrative about Baba Quan from a more positive perspective, Thanh foregrounds the natural beauties of the Mekong Delta rather than its torn-apart appearance resulting from continuous battles. In contrast, these devastating results of the War on the landscape are given separately in the suicide letter. In that sense, Thanh also imaginatively returns to an idealistic, pre-war

natural setting in order to soothe her pain. To express how Thanh creates this natural world in the diary, Mai states that "there was something about my mother's Vietnam past that I would like to understand, the molten fluidness of the rice fields, the graceful sanctuary of a convent, and the blinding purple of bougainvilleas" (p. 168). Thanh gives a sublime description of the rice fields spread into a wide area in the Mekong Delta which symbolizes the "soul of the country" (p. 172) through an elevated and expressive language. Hence, for Thanh, these rice fields represent Vietnamese national identity. As an immigrant far away from these lands, she imaginatively returns to her homeland. According to Carol Bailey, (2016) the act of remembering the homeland and a psychic return to native lands is an important part of the immigrant coping strategy as it can be a source of empowerment for recovery (p. 52). Although nostalgic returns to the lost homeland are criticized by some critics as an escapist act, Marianne Hirsh and Leo Spitzer (2003) argue that nostalgic memory has a potential that "envisions a better future" because "past reconstructed through the animating vision of nostalgia can serve as a creative inspiration and possible emulation within the present, called upon to provide what the present lacks" (p. 83). Thus, Thanh uses the nostalgic recollections to ease her pain in her present state. Instead of describing the land as a battleground which lost its fertility because of the chemicals used by the armies, Thanh relies on her soothing memories about the landscape. She states that if Mai asked questions about the beauties of the homeland, she would enthusiastically tell her about a rice field;

> its beauty, the way it meanders across the land and carpets the horizon in a bright emerald, the way the slate-blue water along the banks buoys the earth and makes it float toward the sky like a carpet in flight, the way the water swallows the distant coconut palms into its depths like a permanent mirror, translucent rectangles forever framed in the very heart, the very soul of the land. (p. 172)

Her description of the land is in a striking contrast with the ones in her suicide letter as she states "the village soil remained dull and dead, an ungenerous gray that could easily keep raw ashes smoldering and hot but could neither keep nor sustain life" (p. 245). The magnitude of the destruction is so great that Thanh states "not even the rice fields, the soul of the country itself, could be revived" (p. 245). Evidently, the destruction of the land has a haunting impact on Thanh's memory but she tries to forget these haunting images by replacing them with more soothing ones that belong to her pre-war life. The act of remembering the homeland from a more idealized perspective becomes her coping mechanism.

Landscape is not important for Thanh just because of its physical appearance, rather, she attributes symbolic meanings to the rice fields as the soul of Vietnam, thus the core element of her identity. According to Keith H. Basso (1988),

> [l]landscapes are available in symbolic terms as well, and so chiefly through the manifold agencies of speech, they can be "detached" from their fixed spatial moorings and transformed into instruments of thought and vehicles of purposive behavior. Thus transformed, landscape and the places that fill them become tools for the imagination, expressive means for accomplishing verbal deeds, and also, of course, eminently portable possessions to which individuals can maintain deep and abiding attachments, regardless of where they travel. (p. 102)

Consequently, rather than its material aspect, the rural landscape centered on the rice field has symbolic value for Thanh. Through diary writing, she puts the landscape imagery in contrast with her present and traumatized state. Instead of writing about her fragmented condition in the present, she imagines a life spent in an idealized nature the components of which are in harmony with one another. In that sense, this mystic landscape in her imagination also represents a unity that she lacks in the real world. In Basso's words, landscape becomes a "portable possession" for Thanh that she purposefully uses as an instrument for reconstructing her past from a more idealized perspective to ease her burden in the present.

Despite the fact that Thanh's imaginative return to the homeland through an expressive writing enables her to deal with the past from a more optimistic perspective and to rewrite her personal and familial history in an idealized way, the extent of the atrocities she experienced, her disadvantageous position as a refugee and her traditional beliefs in the karma make it difficult for her to recover and result in her suicide. The hostile attitude towards the refugees and cultural differences make it hard for Thanh to adapt to her new life in the U.S. As Mai states she sees "danger lurked every day" (p. 20). Moreover, the traditional expectation from the Vietnamese to continue their lives in the ancestral lands and Thanh's attachment to her homeland make it hard to lead a peaceful life. However, the most important factor that prevents Thanh from healing her wounds is her strong belief in bad karma which, she thinks, is ignited by the sinful actions of her parents. As she considers that the bad karma will pass onto her daughter's life through her own body, she commits suicide to protect Mai from these bad consequences. In that respect, Thanh's diary writing works as an instrument both to ease her pain through reconstructing an idealized world for herself and to protect her child from familial trauma and karma.

Although Thanh's individual strategy to deal with her traumatic past is to reinvent or recreate another version of the events to heal herself, her daughter Mai takes another path which would bring a possible healing. In his work *Representing the Holocaust,* LaCapra (1996) argues that working through "involves the attempt to counteract the projective reprocessing of the past through which we deny certain of its features and act out our own desires for self-confirming or identity-forming meaning" (p. 64). This is Mai's strategy in her present life because, rather than letting the past traumas and experiences overwhelm her, Mai chooses to adapt herself to the present realities and to accomplish her own desires in the host country. Because of her young age, which makes it easier for her than her mother to move away from her Vietnamese background, Mai's efforts concentrate on assimilating herself into the American society, thereby forgetting traumas. As she is a '1.5 generation' Vietnamese American, the traditional belief in the importance of being close to ancestral lands for the grown-up Vietnamese does not have crucial meanings for her. In order to express the difference between the older Vietnamese generation who were born and who grew up in Vietnam and immigrated to the U.S. and the '1.5 generation' who were born in Vietnam and moved to the U.S. in their childhood, Bunkong Tuon (2012) states that

> unlike their parents and grandparents, they do not have the adult understanding of their birth country . . . although they usually know how to speak its Asian language and are familiar with its cultural norms. Lacking this adult awareness, they may not have the same nostalgic longing for the Asian country as their parents and grandparents do. (p. 4)

As such, Mai does not have a longing for Vietnam; instead, she believes that the only way for a possible recovery is a successful adaptation into the life in the U. S. where, she considers, rather than a predestined future, anything is possible (*MB*, p. 130). Thanh describes Mai's determination in these words: "Unless you create your own circumstances, make your own luck, determine your own fate, forget your own path through uncharted territory, you are not free in her eyes" (p. 169). Thus, rather than choosing a life of passivity and being stuck in the past, she wants to take control of her present surroundings through the power of her intellect. Additionally, her desire to be accepted into the American society stems from her vulnerability due to her ethnicity which "makes it very difficult for her to live without the security offered by a recognized identity" (Pelaud, 2011, p. 94). She believes that if she is unable to control her new life in the U.S. and makes mistakes, she will be grabbed by her traumatizing experiences as seen in dissociative moments, thereby causing everything to collapse (*MB*, pp. 256-257). Therefore, she believes that the way for freedom

in the new country is to have control over her own destiny and future by breaking away from the past.

Mai's determination is also depicted through her criticism of her mother and the Vietnamese community in the U.S. for being ignorant and unable to act according to the needs of the present situation. They are criticized for their endless hope to return to their homeland which, they believe, is the only place for their healing. They expect that after the Chinese army beat the communist government, they will return to the homeland. Mai finds their optimism very naïve and as an obstacle that prevents them from creating their own future in the U.S. With this point of view, she also represents the '1.5 generation' who "looks to the west with a sideways glance to the east, while the other generation desperately clings to memories of the east, longing for a return to old Viet Nam" (Tuon, 2012, p. 7). She calls herself "an outsider with inside information" who is able to detach herself from the Vietnamese community and analyze their behaviors by adopting an anthropologist's eye. As she states

> [d]etached, I could see this community as a riot of adolescents, obstreperous, awkward, out of sync with the subscribed norms of American life, and beyond the reach of my authority. I could feel for them, their sad shuffles and anachronistic modes of behavior, the peculiar and timid way they held their bodies and occupied the physical space, the unfailing well-manneredness with which they conducted themselves in public—their foreigners' ragged edges . . . in a suburban neighborhood thirty minutes from Washington, D. C., they continued to present themselves as reproductions from the tropics. (p. 146)

From her words, it can be understood that Mai is not happy with the way the first-generation Vietnamese people maintain their life in the U.S. She likens them to child-like creatures who are not able to adapt themselves into the American society. According to Pelaud (2011) words like "riot of adolescents," "obstreperous," "awkward," and "out of sync" actually represent Mai's concern that white Americans might associate her with them, which could halt all her efforts towards full acceptance into American society (p. 95). Mai does not reject the differences in absolute terms but she thinks that if there must be a difference, it must be acceptable and in a way that "strikes an American chord" (*MB*, p. 147). For example, she contrasts the clothes worn by the Vietnamese which are originally worn by the peasants in the rice fields with "kimonos, vulnerable shuffles, and decorative combs" which are more exotic and more suitable for the multicultural spectacle in the U.S. (p.147). Therefore, Mai's efforts to be assimilated into the American society are not just parts of her individual desire, she also wants the Vietnamese community to adapt into the host country because she considers that she will be associated with derogatory stereotypes by 'white Americans'

without a successful adaptation of all the members of her community. She believes that for Vietnamese immigrants, the only way to sustain a better life in a foreign environment is adaptation, rather than isolation from the society.

Although Mai criticizes her mother and the Vietnamese community for being preoccupied with their Vietnamese background and homeland, she does not refrain from using her Vietnamese identity to her own advantage when needed. For Mai, an important step to have "a new beginning unrestricted by a past life" is to receive education at Mount Holyoke College because she believes that to be the only way to create her own future. Mai states that "[a] college for women, the challenge to excel . . . I could walk right into it . . . I would follow the course of my own future" (p. 260). Only through education, she can have dignity and a "movable world" that, she thinks, no war can take away (p. 132). Hence, during the college interview, Mai does her best to get admitted. That scene demonstrates how Mai uses her ability to put her Vietnamese identity to the service of the present situation in order to pass the interview. Before the interview Mai states:

> If the interview was to be a battle, and the interviewer my opponent, this would be a battle strategy . . . I would follow the luminous motion of history, with all its implications and possibilities of victory. I would enter the realm that had delivered Vietnam into a history of brilliant battlefield maneuvers that could imitate to win over the interviewer. (p. 118)

Mai thinks about the mythical and legendary Vietnamese women warriors called Trung Sisters and fancies herself as one of them. She imagines wars that were waged against the Chinese and Mongol invaders with guerrilla tactics which "would unsettle the enemy's nerves and turn an armed force into a terrorized one" (p. 121). Bringing the heroic past of the Vietnamese history through women warriors is done purposefully by Mai as she feels empowered and more self-confident during the interview. Mai adopts this individual strategy because, as Pelaud (2012) states, "on the margin of the margin, and without a recognizable history valorized by institutions to which she can anchor her identity, Mai feels alone and unsafe" (p. 96) in spite of all her efforts to adapt. Consequently, she "strategically appropriates and transforms Vietnamese legends and historical events to manage her fears" (Pelaud, p. 96). She remembers her father's words: "We had driven back five Chinese invasions, three Mongol, and two French" (*MB,* p. 118). Hence, she believes that she could come out of the interview victorious if she feels empowered.

By relying on the victorious past of Vietnam, Mai rejects to be considered and pitied as a victim of war who is in need; in contrast, she wants to prove her intellectual ability by passing the interview. Unsurprisingly, the interviewer asks questions about her Vietnamese

background and her war experience. Mai does not want to be regarded weak and tries to present a more assertive outlook by "keeping [her] gaze level steady and [her] posture perpendicular and upright" (p. 126). She tries to appear unaffected by the atrocities of the War through her rational answers rather than keeping an emotional tone. When the interviewer asks "'It must have been very difficult. You've done a remarkable job adjusting,'" Mai expresses her frustration by stating "What did this woman expect as a response? Can we start the interview over? I wanted to plead" (p.127). Mai is aware that the woman tries to show sympathy for her but that does not work for Mai. She states that if the interviewer wants to have a preliminary chat with her, it would be better if she stated "what a nice skirt you've got, or what a rotten day it is outside" (p. 127). In that sense, she wants to be treated like the other American applicants without an extra favor, which she thinks actually stems from the interviewer's prejudice and pity.

In contrast to the interviewer's American-centered perspective of 'Vietnam' and the 'Vietnamese' as concepts that evoke the War, Mai wants to talk about her pleasant experiences in Vietnam and the daily routines of the civilian people. As Mai states "[i]t was not all about rocket fires and body bags. I could lead her through my neighborhood, at the Mid-autumn Festival" (p. 128). However, she is well aware that it is very hard for her to reverse the association of these concepts with more positive images as "[t]he Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation" (p.128). As such, rather than a definite confrontation, she uses her 'Trung-Sister strategy' by evading and distracting the questions that foreground the War. When the other person asks "'[g]osh, what a shock it must have been. What was it like over there,'" meaning the War, Mai starts to talk about the extremity of heat in Vietnam and states "'it is very hot there. And humid . . . I thought seventy degrees was cold when we first arrived. My mother put up the heat'" (p. 129). Through these strategic evasions, Mai is able to bring the topic to her present engagements as an active person and expresses her resolution for a trauma-free and more hopeful future.

As a result, Mai and her mother take disparate paths in their trauma recovery strategies because of their generational difference and distinct experiences. Thanh has grown and spent many years in the rural Mekong Delta and has more emotional ties with her country. The strong attachment to cultural and traditional Vietnamese beliefs and to the ancestral backgrounds make it hard for her to adapt into the new country. In order to overcome her depression and trauma, she creates an alternative world free from painful memories but her belief in karmic cycles and self-accusation eventually lead her to commit suicide to protect her daughter. Although her imaginary reconstruction does not lead to her

healing, Thanh's efforts to recover and protect Mai demonstrate that she is not in a pathological state. Mai, on the other hand, with the advantage of her young age, is more open to the new ways to cope with the trauma and tries to live in the present. Despite suffering from occasional dissociative moments, she tries to reorient herself in the present by controlling her environment. Rather than looking for the past, she aims to build a new life in the U.S. through a successful adaptation. This adaptation does not mean a complete forgetting of her country of origin as she uses the Vietnamese myths to her advantage during times of stress. The college interview scene indicates Mai's determination to make a new beginning and her successful use of the Vietnamese myths to feel empowered on the way to success.

Similar to *Monkey Bridge, The Lotus and the Storm* illustrates a variety of actions taken by characters which lead them to a potential healing rather than remaining in a pathological state. As Jeffrey Tyler Gibbons (2016) argues, the text is not only a narrative which "is dominated by the suffering encountered and endured by the protagonists" but it is also a "narrative on the process of healing" (p. 98). In this novel, the path to recovery runs through several steps such as revelation of the truth, setting connections with others, forgiving, and a final reconciliation with unwanted multiple selves. In her book *Trauma and Recovery,* Judith Herman (1992) emphasizes the importance of restoring some damaged faculties in the path for recovery which "include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy" (p. 133). Besides, Herman asserts that recovery is only possible when the trauma survivors form relationship with others as isolation does not bring healing. As such, forming connections with others and reclaiming these key faculties enable the traumatized individuals to trust themselves and others which might help them in their recovery. In the later part of her book, Herman emphasizes the need for an alternative perspective by survivors about the moment of trauma as she states that the survivors

> can sometimes identify positive aspects of the self that were forged in the traumatic experience, even while recognizing that any gain was achieved at far too great a price. From a position of increased power in her present life, the survivor comes to a deeper recognition of her powerlessness in the traumatic situation and thus to a greater appreciation of her own adaptive resources. For example, a survivor who used dissociation to cope with terror and helplessness may begin to marvel at this extraordinary capacity of mind. Though she developed this capacity as a prisoner and may have become imprisoned by it as well, once she is free, she may even use her trance capability to enrich her present life rather than to escape from it. (p. 214)

Herman's approach demonstrates that through a more understanding perspective towards adaptive skills such as dissociation at the moment of trauma, survivors can come to terms with themselves and find healing. This appreciation of the self enables the survivors to face their own realities and become free. In that respect, the ending of the novel presents an example of the understanding of the multiple selves as part of adaptive skills because, rather than escaping from her real identity, Mai learns the importance of reconciliation with herself to navigate her present life.

Similar to Mai, her father Minh also learns to find solace towards the end of the novel through the acts of forgiving and reconciliation with an old friend who has betrayed him for several reasons. Years after his wife's death and their departure from Vietnam, Minh is still under the effect of the traumatic events and has not recovered from the loss of his wife. Day by day, his condition gets worse with long pauses in speech and feeling of numbness. To express his condition, Mai asks "[c]an a person dissolve before one's very eyes, become out of focus because he is vanishing slowly into the dungeons of his own mind?" (p. 270). She is very well aware that her father cannot break free from the past experiences similar to her and states that the "deeper reserve of calm he has managed to accumulate through the years seems to be dwindling. Now, late in life and in a foreign country, he suddenly needs to be rescued" (p. 270). In the end, Minh finds solace by reuniting with and forgiving his old friend Phong after it is revealed that Phong also feels conscience-stricken because of past events and wants to be forgiven.

Phong is normally Minh's best friend when they are in the military service in Vietnam. During the military coup in 1963, it is Phong who saves Minh's life through his connections with senior officers. However, Minh starts to bear a grudge against his friend first because of his connections to the coup plotters who, he thinks, put the country in a worse condition and later because he discovers Phong's affairs with his wife Quy. Minh also accuses Phong of the death of Quy since she dies in the South China Sea when on the same boat with him. Minh's hatred towards Phong is to such a degree that he wishes he were dead rather than his wife. However, after repetitive meetings with him in the hospital, Minh starts to feel sorry for Phong and forgives his old friend.

In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu (1999) emphasizes the importance of the act of forgiving for reconciliation by stating that

> True reconciliation is not cheap . . . Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth . . . It

> is a risky undertaking but, in the end, it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing. In the act of forgiveness, we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to make a new beginning on a course that will be different from the one that caused us the wrong. We are saying, here is a chance to make a new beginning. It is an act of faith that the wrong-doer can change. (pp. 270-271-273)

Hence, rather than forgetting the events and pretending that things happened in another way, reconciliation is also possible when the truth is faced and remembered with all its awfulness. Clara Mucci (2013) states that "individuals can be forgiven not the events," and it is impossible to forgive the ones who do not show up to be forgiven (pp. 235-236). If the wrong-doers are sincerely apologetic about the events by taking all the responsibility for the traumatic results they have caused, only then a true forgiving can take place. It cannot be achieved through force or without the sufferers' readiness. However, when the act of forgiving is successfully fulfilled, it promotes "self-respect by enabling the injured parties to refuse to let their lives be dominated by harmful thoughts, memories, and negative feelings" (Kellerman, 2007, p. 149) As such, forgiving is important because it shows people's resilience and paves the way for a possible healing, and it informs a more hopeful future.

In the novel, Phong is described by Mai as someone who has repetitively come to talk to Minh in the previous years, but Minh's anger towards him hinders a healthy communication between them, as well as achieving a resolution. Consequently, she believes that his demand to meet her father again in the hospital with his remorseful attitude is futile as it will resolve nothing. When he calls again and informs that he will come, Mai is afraid that their meeting will bring more harm than soothing and states that "'[c]an you not talk about what happened or did not happen with him? Let it alone'" (p. 286). Although she wants to be pragmatic and aims that the past memories do not put her father in a bad condition by triggering his trauma, Mai does not know that her advice can, instead, prevent a real reconciliation through talking about the past and revealing the truth. As Mai expects, her father's attitude towards Phong is accusatory and he does not want to talk to him. However, Phong knows the importance of the moment for himself and Minh as he begs him to listen to him and be forgiven. When Minh states: "'I don't know what you want'" Phong answers "Not one thing for myself. I just want to give us, you, peace of mind" with a sad look (p. 290). Phong's answer indicates that he is also aware that when the old friends are reconciled again, their pain will ease. Phong's attitude in their first meeting indicates that he really feels

remorseful for his past wrong-doings and wants to reveal all the truth about what happened in Vietnam but his efforts fail.

Phong's last words in their first meeting are important as these words also give name to the chapter of the novel 'History is Responsible.' Before leaving the room without being forgiven, Phong states that "'[h]istory is responsible. I did not let it happen,"' then he starts crying and states "'I was in love with her, for God's sake'" (p. 291). Thus, he reveals the truth that he also loved Quy and wanted to protect her but failed to do so as the boat was attacked by pirates. Phong's emphasis on history is important because it draws attention to the need to look at the events from a broader perspective. He does not reject his responsibilities and wants to be forgiven, but, besides individual actions, the Vietnam War and its traumatic consequences on the Vietnamese people are actually results of political and economic interests of various groups and nations at that historical moment. His words remind the atrocities all the Vietnamese people experienced because of the War, their dispersal to various countries and their efforts to save their loved ones, which sometimes failed and resulted in deaths. Remembering Clara Mucci's words on the unforgivable nature of the traumatic events in contrast to individual wrong-doings, one could say that Phong wants Minh to forgive him as an individual who tried to save Minh's wife and is sincerely remorseful for his other actions. History is responsible because he is also a victim who has lost his wife, his leg and his country similar to Minh.

In spite of Phong's efforts in the first meeting, Minh's anger towards Phong and wish for him to be dead increase his disturbance. He states "[Phong's] reappearance, even if brief and limited, has magnified feelings I thought had been quieted" (p. 311). His rejection to reconcile through listening to the sufferings of the other and his wish for revenge hinder his recovery. To emphasize revenge as a hindering factor in the the healing of sufferers, Herman (1992) argues that although the traumatized individuals consider that "revenge will bring relief, repetitive revenge fantasies actually increase [their] torment . . . revenge fantasies may be as arousing, frightening, and intrusive as images of the original trauma" (p. 189). Consequently, his hostile attitude and rejection to talk leaves Minh stuck in his trauma.

In the second meeting, when Phong cries and reveals that his wife killed herself by taking the pills the week before, for the first time Minh starts to feel sorry for him. Phong again accuses himself of the suffering they both have experienced and states that Minh is right to feel hatred towards him. However, rather than, holding an accusatory attitude, Minh starts to see the suffering Phong goes through and tries to console him with his hand on Phong's shoulder and wants to listen him. In their conversation, Phong reveals his true

identity once as a Viet-Cong agent working in the south. He states: "I wanted to drive out the foreigners . . . as one is thought to believe . . . I wanted something better than Diem and all those who followed. I could not have foreseen the scale of retribution" (p. 327). To Mai's surprise, Minh does not become angry but tries to understand Phong's reasons for his acts. Phong's statements are important because he puts himself in a dangerous situation by revealing his prior connections to an organization that is considered an enemy among the Vietnamese American.

By this revelation, Phong demonstrates his honest desire to repent and be forgiven so he does not want to keep secrets anymore; instead, he wants the truth to be known. To emphasize the importance of truth for recovery, Herman (1992) states that "telling the truth about terrible events [is prerequisite] both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims . . . when the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery" (p. 1). Thus, Phong's confessions about his feelings towards Quy, his efforts to protect her and his true identity do not create a feeling of anger in Minh, rather, he begins to soften. He concedes "[i]t was clear to me. His face, his spirit, and very being were rearranged in a way that pled for forgiveness. His life haunted him. He was still there, weary and used up but caught inside a deep regret" (*TLTS*, p. 332). Mai also senses the transformed feeling of her father through these words: "I am surprised to see that father's face softens as he takes in Uncle Number Two's sad perspective. For the first time he fixes his eyes to [Phong's] face and leaves them there" (p. 329). According to Desmond Tutu (1999) forgiving "involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them" (p. 270). By taking Phong's perspective, Minh starts to understand his old friend's motivations for his actions, his suffering, and by offering consolation, he is ready to forgive him.

The healing effect of the act of forgiving on Minh becomes clear when he starts to have positive emotions rather than feelings of hatred and anger. He starts to feel a sense of peace as a result of his reconciliation with Phong. When his feelings are analyzed in parallel with Clara Mucci's words that by forgiving, the individuals get health benefits through increase of the "positive emotions such as empathy, hope, and compassion" (p. 222), it is evident that Minh's reconciliation frees him from the burden of anger that keeps him stuck in the past. The resulting positive emotions lead him into a tranquilized state as he discloses:

> I felt no anger, only a radiating calm, like a wide-open lotus flower that rises from the mud and unfolds petals that float reassuringly on the water's surface . . . I opted for a resumption of normal existence

> devoid of howling recriminations and judgements . . . I am nothing as simple as happy but I am here, inhabiting fully this moment in which I am unburdened at last. (pp. 336-337)

As Minh's words indicate, it is not only Phong who needs to be forgiven by repenting in order to ease his suffering; it is also required for Minh to unburden himself as he acknowledges "I felt it too, as if the gift were equally mine" (p. 337). Thus, the act of forgiving leads Minh to feel empowered in the present time. Rather than focusing on the traumatizing past, he opts for another possibility, the possibility of an optimistic future. In that respect, Minh's decision to forgive his friend by means of empathy paves the way for recovery.

Similar to her father's finding solace after the revelation of truth and the act of forgiving, Mai also goes through a series of stages that eventually lead to her recovery. One of the most important factors that contributes negatively to her trauma is the feeling of betrayal by her mother as she believes that her mother left her alone during the times of the atrocity and did not want to come together with her family by choosing to stay in Vietnam. In his *Writing History, Writing Trauma,* Dominick LaCapra (2001) states that "[t]he feeling of trust betrayed or fidelity broken (however unjustified that feeling may in fact be) is one of the greatest impediments to working through problems" (p. 144). Consequently, her mother's depression after Mai's sister's death and her preference to stay behind in Vietnam leads Mai to believe that her mother did not love them. The hatred towards the mother is to such a degree that when Quy's name is mentioned it triggers Mai's trauma and puts her in a trance in which the dissociated self Bao takes control with all her violent nature. During the first meeting of Phong and Minh in the hospital, which brings the memories of her mother, Mai's reaction demonstrates that her trauma associated with her mother is still very strong. Bao takes control and states

> [i]t is a flick of mother's old self, interposing. The world before me alternates harshly and abruptly between anger and sadness . . . I feel a burn in my throat and little explosions in my chest. It always returns to mother. And the moment it does, the past keeps coming and coming straight at me. I don't know what it is that makes it all suddenly very clear to me, but here it is . . . I am almost manic, with this simple but now-obvious singularity of thought . . . Of course, after our sister died our mother did not want us. (*TLTS*, p. 288)

Thus, even more than twenty years after they immigrated to the U.S., Mai is still under the traumatic effect of her mother's loss which she thinks was Quy's own preference. According to Jeffrey Tyler Gibbons (2016), Mai "is not whole because of the emotional and geographic distance between them and, given the lack of truth that she has access to, she continued forward in the United States lacking a complete narrative of her mother" (p. 102). However,

the revelation of the truth about Quy's efforts to save her family and the reasons for her staying behind enable Mai to give up her negative attitude towards her mother and to construct a narrative about her. Hence, the disclosure about the mother's real intentions at the end of the novel helps her recovery.

When Phong confesses his wrongdoings to Minh, Mai is also present to hear about her mother. During these confessions and the disclosure of an old letter that Phong sent from Vietnam to Minh, it becomes clear that it was actually Quy who saved Minh's life during the time of the military coup. By taking advantage of Phong's emotional attachment to her, Quy convinces him to use his connections in order to save her husband from prison. By reading the letter, they also learn that when Quy is in Vietnam, she uses her last remaining money to save Phong and her brother from prison by bribing the members of the new government. She also contacts Chinese sea traders to arrange boats in order to save escaping Vietnamese people. However, she eventually dies tragically in a boat when she tries to join her family in the U.S. Thus, rather than a dishonest person who voluntarily has sexual relations with her husband's friend, Quy's only aim is to protect her family. Besides, in contrast to her previous melancholic states and passivity isolating herself from people, Quy becomes a powerful figure similar to the Vietnamese woman warriors whose stories had impressed Mai in her childhood. To express his wife's efforts and sacrifices for them, Minh states

> I look at the letter as if her sacrifices, so many, can be felt and understood through a careful examination of Phong's handwriting . . . We, Phong and I, her brother, all of us, have been the helpless and infirm ones in need of rescue. My wife was our source of endurance all along. (p. 310)

Mai also learns the sacrifices her mother made for the sake of her family from their American friend called Cliff. Similar to Phong's confessions, Cliff's revelations about Quy evoke more positive feelings in Mai. He repetitively states how Quy loved Mai and explains her reasons for staying back in Vietnam to meet them later. When all the truth is revealed, Mai begins to change her opinion about her mother and reflects on the soothing results of the reconciliation Mai expresses her feelings by saying that

> I still can only guess at what might have happened years ago to our mother. Still, with this news, I can cling to the gentle swell of a new order: our mother did not behave capriciously, or hard-heartedly. She was flawed but not heartless. We were not callously abandoned. (p. 351)

Hence, rather than feeling hatred towards Quy, which has caused Mai to repress her memories related to her mother, to her surprise, she begins to understand her mother's motivations and feels a sense of pleasure while thinking about her and her childhood memories in the town of Cholon in Vietnam.

After her father's death, Mai's decision to take his ashes to Vietnam facilitates her eventual reconciliation with her own self. Mai's motivation behind going to Vietnam is to fulfill her father's last wish to reunite with his wife. However, rather than an act that is performed for her father, it ends up being a contribution to her recovery. According to Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (2003) "in the act of recall, traumatic events are inevitably linked to the place of their occurrence, and thus physical return can facilitate the process of working through" (p. 84). On their work on the effect of returning to the grounds of trauma for healing, Hannah Murray, Christopher Merritt and Nick Gray (2015) stress the positive outcomes of visiting the site because it creates "a sense of closure and moving on" (p. 2). They state that "[o]n site visits, noticing differences between the scene of the trauma now compared to when the trauma occurred facilitates discrimination between 'now' and 'then,' helping the event feel more in the past" (p. 2). Visiting the grounds of the trauma also has the possibility for the survivors to find new information about the traumatic event which can help their recovery (p. 3). Thus, rather than causing negative effects, the return can have positive impacts on the survivors. Similarly, Mai's return to Cholon and her experiences there result in her recovery because, as Gibbons states, this return "offers the opportunity to revisit the grounds of her childhood, to revisit the points of trauma in her life, and to revise the memories she has held for so long" (p. 103). Besides, she unexpectedly discovers that her childhood friend who is thought to be dead still lives there, which also contributes to her recovery.

After Mai returns to her homeland, she begins to wander in the streets and she realizes that life there continues at a normal pace. She states that "the city itself has been resurrected and revived, after its long decline . . . I look around, wanting to be overtaken by nostalgia" (p. 354). She also realizes that the city is not exactly the same as the one she has always yearned for during her years in the U.S. This creates a sense of breaking away from the nostalgic recollections of the place and its traumatic loss. "*It is exactly as it was*-this is what people like me want very much to tell themselves when they return home. But this is not the case . . . this is no longer my city. It is no longer my inheritance" (p. 355). However, rather than a sense of uneasiness, she still feels a sense of relief while she wanders through the city.

Through her journey, Mai also begins to reconcile with her traumatized self as she does not feel uncomfortable with Bao. Rather than a violent tranced state damaging the body at the moment of a small reminiscence of past trauma, Bao's occurrence turns into something that Mai wants as she starts to believe that is the only way to find peace. She states that

> [t]o truly discover myself here, I must hang on to Bao. I keep going despite the fear of relapse . . . It is a big task, managing and modulating one's expectations. For the first time in more than thirty years I am riding on her optimism. I am filled with a large, booming sense of anticipation. (p. 356)

As such, in contrast to her damaging features, Bao becomes her other self that is associated with positive feelings and hope. She becomes what Mai needs to navigate in the streets of her childhood city to be unburdened from the past trauma. By walking in the streets and remembering happy years of her childhood, Mai turns to her inner self and accepts her dissociated identity as her own self rather than something to get rid of. She expresses that "our lives of separateness seem to be disintegrating here. For a few moments I am inside her gravitational field. We are together in a double loop of shared consciousness, hermetically sealed from the world" (p.358). It can be said that, after this scene, many more steps of reconciling with her second identity are yet to be taken.

Mai's reconciliation with herself continues in parallel with her other experiences in Vietnam. She surprisingly discovers that James is alive. Apart from being an American soldier and a friend of Mai's father, James is a person who helps Mai in her initial recovery after her sister's death. When Mai loses her speaking ability after that traumatic event, he frequently visits her, and through his efforts, she regains her ability. Consequently, Mai's assumption that she witnesses his death during the violent Tet assault on his way to save her has a great impact on her. She expresses the moment of trauma in these words:

> I hear a shot go off. A body falls to the ground. Everything turns black yet again…When I come back to myself . . . James is no longer there…I see red streaks where the earth bleeds, where flesh has been dragged. The back of my hand is torn and chewed. (p. 164)

Mai's losing consciousness and biting her hand in a dissociated state demonstrates the massive effect of James's assumed death. After that incident, James is never mentioned in the text until he is rediscovered in Vietnam upon her return. Bao expresses his appearance as a crucial moment that provides pleasure and satisfaction for them: "With his appearance the dead have awakened; our sister dances . . . our mother with her face beaming and flushed drinks tea with her Chinese friends, and our father shows us his polished boots" (p. 370). Additionally, she points out that "[f]or years Mai has blamed me for his death. But here he is now, alive, in this single, well-aimed moment among all the unfixed, infinite number of moments in time" (p. 363). Similar to Mai, James has also returned to Vietnam after the War in order to find healing by facing his past traumas in the place of their occurrence. Thus, their surprising reconnection leads Mai to stop her accusatory stance towards herself and paves the way for recovery. Bao's further expression indicates the healing effect of James's appearance:

> She wants to say "I thought you died" but the words resist. The spoken word, language, feels awkward, a clumsy attempt at translating untranslatable feeling from a deep emotional well. What matters is the healing presence that being next to him brings. What matters is the fact that he is here. That we are all here. The world that was certified by subtraction is restored for now to its proper balance. (p. 365)

James's presence gives Mai the chance to talk about the happy years of her childhood and their lives in later years. They also talk about the aftermath of the traumatic events that led to their separation. In contrast to her years-long silence about her traumatic experiences, for the first time Mai talks about her past and displays her feelings without being afraid that talking will retraumatize her. In parallel with Herman's observation that story-telling is a "work of reconstruction" that transforms the traumatic memory and enables it to be incorporated into the traumatized individual's life story (p. 175), Mai's talking about her life story and trauma indicates she does not escape from her traumatized self anymore. In that sense, remembering the happy years and the verbal utterance of the traumatic events can be considered as an example of the 'talking cure' as it provides an emotional relief to both parties.

Together with James, Mai carries out a final act that further relieves her. She hires a boat and spills her father's ashes into the Saigon River to fulfill his last wish. She believes that her father's ashes will meet her mother's body in the South China Sea. Through this action, Mai further strengthens her reconciliation with her mother and in this way, she gets the chance to mourn for her. In line with Freud's (1917) and Herman's (1992) emphasis on the importance of mourning for recovery, Mai begins to feel the healing effect of her ritualistic act because, by doing this, she starts to mourn for her losses. Bao notes the importance of that moment: "For years she was a ghost, invisible, absent, living a life apart from us . . . Now she is somewhere in the South China Sea . . . Soon our father will be released to join her" (*TLTS*, p. 377). Thus, rather than being a taboo which is left unspoken for years, her mother becomes someone in Mai's life story again. By leaving her restrained attitude and fear of trance, she begins to display her emotions in an act of crying for her mother. The relief is expressed by Bao: "Here is a little hush of consolation, the surprising relief of death held and released" (p. 378). Mourning for the loved ones and releasing the repressed emotions further enable Mai to make peace with her dissociated self as both she and Bao want to be "reconciled and integrated in shared web" (p. 386). Mai begins to think about healing her wounds when she returns to Virginia. In that respect, the novel can be claimed to have an optimistic ending because, through her experiences, Mai starts to have

more positive ideas about her own self and this, step by step, helps her to learn to live with her multiple personalities which would reduce further disturbances in her life.

Along with individual struggles to find solace after traumatic events and loss of homeland, Cao's both novels have examples of recovery attempts through connecting with other Vietnamese survivors in the U.S. Besides harming the ties and dividing the people, it is possible to say that traumas experienced collectively also bring people together. In Kai Erikson's (1995) words "trauma can create a community… it can happen that otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie" (pp. 185, 187). In that respect, bonding with the members of their communities and sharing their common experiences have the potential for a collective recovery from trauma. According to Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger (1997), gathering in a community helps people to overcome their trauma in three ways: first "by knowing of others' suffering, which provides reassurance that one is not alone," second "by actively developing an expressive sense and rituals of fellowship in anger, shame, helplessness, grief, and threat," and third "by emergence of collectively shared attribution of blame for the event" (p. 864). Thus, for traumatized individuals, community becomes an important coping mechanism.

Especially, for the refugees or immigrants who lose their homeland in a sudden way and have difficulties in adapting themselves into their new lives in the host country, the communities they form enable them to eliminate their loneliness and to cope with traumas. On his work on immigrants, Dominque DeFreece (2016) states that "active social networks are often used as a tool to protect the migrants from thoughts of past violent experiences and bring them something to look forward to or have hope" (p. 10) The social connections which are strengthened through rituals and festivals in the new country "bring happiness and nostalgia of the good old days into the lives of immigrants" (p. 10). As such, for the above-mentioned reasons, the Vietnamese immigrants formed communities in different parts of the U.S. in order to support members of the same ethnic background. Named Little Saigons, these areas became places where immigrants displayed solidarity with each other in the face of their collective traumas and helped one another. To underline the significance of these sites for the Vietnamese refugees, Karín Aguilar-San Juan (2009) states that

> Little Saigons across the United States served as racial safety zones, especially as anti-Asian hostility and violence peaked in the 1980s, being close to others provided needed comfort and validation. The need was heightened by the linguistic and cultural strangeness that the new Vietnamese population represented to 'host' neighborhoods and regions. (p. xx)

Thus, yearning for the homeland, being a stranger to the culture of the host country and vulnerable to attacks, Vietnamese immigrants construct their own neighborhoods to support each other. Naming these places after the ones in their homeland demonstrates a kind of nostalgic reconstruction of these sites where immigrants feel at home.

Both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* present examples of interpersonal bonding and solidarity in the Little Saigon community. In *Monkey Bridge*, the example of communal support is demonstrated through gatherings in different houses where Vietnamese people come together to share their life stories and converse about their future lives. Carried out by an important woman figure named Mrs. Bay, these gatherings have an important therapeutic effect on Mai's mother Thanh's and other individuals' psychology. Mai observes the meetings in their house:

> So, for the past few weeks, our apartment had become a busy site for evening feasts and weekend hangouts. My mother would be able to claim graciousness of host, although Mrs. Bay and others would do all the preparatory and clean-up work. It was an act of devotion on their part. (*MB*, p. 139)

Thus, instead of leaving a member of their community in isolation, Vietnamese people demonstrate an act of solidarity with Thanh in her recovery. Mai relates the importance of these gatherings for her mother in these words: "I could say with a certain degree of certainty that she was truly recuperating" (p. 139). Not only Thanh but also other members of the community try to find solace in these gatherings. Together, Vietnamese people talk about their similar experiences and carry out rituals around the family altars in the houses, which enable them to mourn for their deceased loved ones. Forgotten by the official ceremonies of both the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the U.S., which revolve around their own victories or loses in the War, the Vietnamese refugees carry out these commemorations and rituals at their houses to "establish a shared past and historically rooted collective memory which functions to create social solidarity in the present" (Everyman, 2004, p. 64). What is more, they also talk about the future from a more optimistic perspective which creates relief at the present time.

In these gatherings, the members of the Little Saigon community sometimes call fortune tellers to find out information about future events. These Vietnamese fortune tellers open a way for the refugees to feel optimistic as their predictions offer more positive scenarios for them. On one of these occasions, the fortune teller states that "the communists will destroy each other soon enough, and in no more than two or three years we will be going back home" (p. 149). As the Vietnamese believe that the fortune tellers have supernatural

power and are supported by the ancient Vietnamese saints, their prophecies have a therapeutic effect. Although Mai does not believe in these prophecies as she tries to adapt herself into modern American life, she cannot keep herself from thinking about their pleasing words either. She expresses: "I was not normally prone to astrological contemplations, but what harm could there be in a little bit of astrology? I could see why it might be comforting" (p. 248). That is because through astrological predictions, fortune tellers convince them to believe that "if human enterprises could not alter the course of history, then humans could simply declare themselves free from brutishness of everyday endeavors" (p. 248). Thus, fortune tellers provide them with what they desire, the desire to see the defeat of their enemies and the possibility to return to their homeland.

Although *The Lotus and the Storm* does not have as many examples of communal gatherings as *Monkey Bridge* in which survivors come together to share their similar experiences and take part in ritualistic events, still the importance of Little Saigon is demonstrated through its soothing effect on the characters. It is a place where the Vietnamese people go in order to ease their pain and unburden themselves from the longing of the homeland. According to Ron Everyman (2004) "the way things are organized, whether the objects of routine, everyday experience, like the furniture in a room or the more consciously organized objects in a museum, evokes memory and a sense of the past, whether this is articulated through language or not" (p. 68). Everyman also states that cultural materials like food and music can evoke "strong emotional responses connected to the past and can be formative of individual and collective memory" (p. 68). By reading the novel from that perspective, it can be said that Little Saigon is like an open-air museum for the Vietnamese where they can find objects evoking their prewar lives. Walking in the streets of Little Saigon Minh refers to the healing effect of the place:

> Almost immediately I feel a sense of relief. Leaving behind the hooks and snares of life in this new country, we come here for the comfort of pho noodle soup and other aromas from home. I can almost feel its recuperative powers, the full-throated pleasures promised by the simulation of familiar sights and sounds . . . I hear Vietnamese music coming from the loudspeakers. A beguiling complexity of shops and restaurants lies before us, promising an abundance of nostalgia. Even the food in in all its varieties of northern, central, and southern fares, is incidental. For it is nostalgia, the vehement singularity of nostalgia, more than anything else, that brings us here. (*TLTS*, p. 55)

His words demonstrate that the location built by the Vietnamese has a lot of objects reminding them of homeland and these things have curative effects on the refugees.

In the novel, Little Saigon is also presented as a place where the Vietnamese come together to voice their problems as a community and take political actions against the human rights violations by the regime in Vietnam. Minh observes the solidarity among the Vietnamese with positive feelings and thinks that it will facilitate a more hopeful future. He expresses his feelings as follows:

> [They] have become unapologetically political. I do not know when this happened. It was not so when we arrived in 1975; we had worried more about how our children fared in school or whether we should relocate to warmer locales in California or Texas. The younger generation's interest in the political embattlements of Vietnam surprises me and sometimes fills me with hope. (p. 57)

His observation demonstrates that besides evoking memories of the old days, Little Saigon functions as a place of political action and solidarity.

Like her father, Mai also observes and gives information about the Vietnamese community and the ways of their survival in the U.S. As Little Saigon grows, it is hinted that people who normally do not know each other, commemorate notable events in one another's houses and celebrate traditional Vietnamese festivals in groups. In her own words: "Weddings, births, Tet are all openings that the Vietnamese in America use to channel the ragged immensity of their longings for things past. It's all about reconstructing and reclaiming what is gone" (pp. 271-278). In that respect, unable to return to Vietnam, they create a replica of what they have lost to have the feeling of safety and familiarity.

Besides, people in Little Saigon form associations in order to help the ones who are in a more disadvantaged situation and to bring their loved ones from Vietnam. The community supports its members by developing economic ties. One strategy the Vietnamese take to save money is to take part in the 'hui' practice. As the refugees are unable to take loans from American banks, they decide to form their own money-saving programs and give it to the ones in need in return for their monthly contribution. In that respect, 'hui' is "an informal rotating credit association" (p. 60). The ones who take part in the 'hui' meet once a month and put some of their earnings in the pot; "everyone has a chance to draw from the *hui* pot once until the rotation is complete and a new hui rotation begins" (p. 60). Through the money saved through 'hui,' people are able to navigate their way in the U.S. To emphasize its importance for the immigrants, Mai states that "it is the hui that allows people with no collateral or credit history to nurture their largest dreams and tenderest hopes, by leveraging the circuitry of friendship and social connections for financial purposes" (p. 61). As such, the hui practice becomes a Vietnamese refugee strategy in the host nation to compensate for their disadvantaged position. Through this economic practice, the members

of the community demonstrate an economic solidarity for a better life in the new country as they are well aware that, as an unwanted group that signifies the failures in the War to the Americans, the only way to recover is to strengthen their economic and social ties with one another.

To conclude, both of Cao's novels present a multiplicity of paths taken by the characters in order to find solace to recover from past traumas. This demonstrates that, similar to varied forms of traumatic responses to the Vietnam War because of diverse character traits and distinct experiences, the efforts of recovery also depend on these diversities. Survivors' ages, cultural beliefs, distinct experiences, and their present situation as refugees shape their paths for recovery. In that respect, the novels demonstrate that there is not a single recipe for healing from trauma. In *Monkey Bridge*, while Thanh tries to find solace through the power of imagination and writing about homeland from a nostalgic perspective, her daughter Mai considers adaptation through education as a way to recover and to navigate her way in the U.S. In *The Lotus and the Storm*, Minh and Mai's cases demonstrate the healing effect of forgiving and reconciliation after the discovery of truth. Mai's return to homeland and her experiences there also create hope for her possible recovery in the future. Besides the individual efforts, both novels also have examples of efforts for a collective healing as the Vietnamese immigrants create their own neighborhoods where they form connections and display solidarity with members of their community.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the representations of trauma and the efforts towards recovery in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* in the light of various trauma theories. In that respect, this study has utilized both traditional trauma theories focusing on the immediate and belated effects of traumatic events on the individual's psyche and the alternative and pluralistic models that emphasize the cultural and historical contexts that shape the interpretations of traumatic experiences by individuals. Since both novels are mainly about the experiences of Vietnamese people who have been forced to leave their homeland and to immigrate to the U.S. after the War, their analysis focuses on the efforts that aim to foreground the voice of the marginalized victims of the Vietnam War whose experiences have been neglected. Thus, rather than an American-centered perspective that revolves around the trauma of soldiers returning from the Vietnam War, this study has observed the effects of atrocities on the Vietnamese civilians in the U.S. as an attempt to contribute to the efforts to 'decolonize' Western-centered trauma studies.

In both her novels, Cao demonstrates the effects of trauma on individuals through multiple representations depending on their age, traditional beliefs, the magnitude of the traumatic events they experienced and their present conditions. In that respect, the individuals' responses to traumatic events can sometimes be similar, such as dissociation, melancholia or fixation, and at other times disparate. Additionally, Cao also depicts the multiple and diverse paths taken by the characters in order to ease their pain and facilitate possible healing. Rather than portraying the Vietnamese as victims living in passivity and a continuous pathological state, through her novels, Cao presents examples displaying the individuals' resilience and desire for recovery. In effect, the intentional use of the same name 'Mai' for protagonists in both novels can be understood on two different levels: (1) difference and (2) similarity. First, though these characters have the same name, the fact that the two protagonists live through different kinds of traumatic experiences sheds light on the variety of emotional baggage of the trauma survivors since they come from different backgrounds, have different life stories and go through different healing processes. Second, as a common female Vietnamese name, it can be an indicator of the sameness of the tragedy experienced by the Vietnamese people. By considering these every-person figures, it might be claimed that though ways in which they deal with trauma are varied, the reason for their suffering is the same. Also, the meaning of the name Mai, "a precious yellow flower that

blooms during Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year," is suggestive of rebirth, "hope and renewal" (Cao, 2014, para. 11). Therefore, the use of the same name might be a strong signal that reflects the tragedy and recovery at the same time.

In both novels, the protagonists go through different levels of dissociation because of the traumatic events they experienced in the past. The concept of dissociation refers to the difficulty in properly integrating the traumatic memory in the brain. Thus, it is disconnected from other properly stored conscious and unconscious material. In *Monkey Bridge*, the example of dissociation can be observed in the hospital scene where Mai is unable to control herself at the present moment drifting between the past and the present. Since Mai is fixated on her traumatic experience, when she is in a similar situation, the intrusive traumatic memories impose themselves on her life. Although Mai is aware that she is not in the past and tries to control herself, the dissociated memory makes it difficult for her to reorient herself in the present. From Mai's narrative, it is understood that she occasionally experiences these time shifts and flashbacks when she associates something in the present day with the past traumatizing incident.

In *The Lotus and the Storm*, the repetitive traumatizing events lead to a more serious form of dissociation. Rather than occasional intrusive memories that take the victim to the scene of the traumatic experience, Mai, in this novel, displays the symptoms of dissociated identity personality. Similar to the case of Lucie, a patient of Pierre Janet, who has multiple personalities because of a traumatic experience, Mai's psyche has been split into three distinct personalities. Her narrative does not include much information about her dissociated selves except for some situations where she feels the presence of another person in her life. However, when Bao, one of Mai's dissociated selves, takes control of the narrative, the effect of the trauma on Mai becomes more apparent. Bao is a symptom that occurs during the traumatic event as a result of the feeling of terror followed by anger since Mai's calls for help are left unanswered by her mother. Having witnessed the death of loved ones and losing the sense of trust in her mother as a protective figure cause Mai to go through occasional self-harming tranced states even in her later years in the U.S. Although both protagonists in have similar experiences and symptoms, dissociation, as a symptom, does not occur exactly in the same way for both of them. While, in the first instance, the protagonist is aware of the present situation and tries to control herself when dealing with intrusive memories and flashbacks, in the second novel, Mai displays the destructive behaviors at an unconscious

level when her traumatic memories are triggered, putting her in tranced states under Bao's control.

Another major outcome of the traumatic experiences is the constant melancholic states of the characters. In both novels, melancholia occurs due to a sudden loss of the 'love object' and the inability to go through a proper mourning process. As a consequence, the characters become fixated on what they have lost and isolate themselves from other people in their present lives. In *Monkey Bridge*, Thanh goes through a serious melancholic state isolating herself from other people and rejects taking the necessary nourishment crucial for her weakened body. Thanh's melancholia results from her inability to bury her mother properly in the family burial ground, her tragic discovery about the real identity of her father, and the enforced departure from the ancestral lands.

In *The Lotus and the Storm*, after the sudden death of Mai's sister Khanh, melancholia dominates the lives of Mai's family disrupting the bonds among them. Similar to Thanh in *Monkey Bridge*, Quy goes through a period of silence isolating herself from other family members as she is fixated on her lost daughter. Melancholia is also represented through an accusatory stance undertaken towards the self and the others for the loss of the loved ones. During their occasional dialogues, Mai witnesses her parents' fight and anger towards each other for having roles in the death of their daughter. At other times, Mai hears her mother's emotional outburst in her bedroom accompanied by feelings of guilt and cries of forgiveness from her lost daughter. Directing the accusations towards the self and each other, rather than towards the perpetrators of the attack that resulted in the loss of the loved one, is a common symptom of melancholics since they consider that the loss could be prevented if the right action was taken by them.

Besides the events that cause trauma on the individual psyche, Cao also demonstrates how cultural and traditional beliefs shape the interpretations of traumatic experiences through the meanings attached to them. In *Monkey Bridge*, the stories and the myths about the importance of loyalty to ancestral lands make it hard for the Vietnamese refugees to live in other lands as they believe that they would not find peace without those lands where the souls of their ancestors rest. Cao demonstrates the trauma related to the loss of ancestral lands thorough the description of the Vietnamese villagers who are forced to leave their lands and settle in 'strategic hamlets.' They all live in melancholic states and have post-traumatic

stress as they are afraid of losing their souls if they do not return to their ancestral lands. Thanh's mother eventually dies because of the distress of losing these ancestral lands.

Similarly, Thanh's melancholia is also related to her traditional beliefs. Since she has lost her mother's body without a proper burial, she is convinced that her mother's soul is lost and is still wandering in the fields trying to rejoin the ancestors. Thanh's trauma is further shaped through the assumption that karmic cycles control her life. She believes her birth is an outcome of an illicit sexual relationship; a sin committed by her family. This sin has started bad karma which will also influence her and her daughter's future lives negatively. Since she believes that the only way to prevent negative karma from affecting her daughter's future is death, she commits suicide at the end of the novel.

The belief in karma ignited by misconducts resulting in traumatic events is also present in *The Lotus and the Storm*. Although Minh is an educated, high-ranking officer in the army, he is of the opinion that the catastrophes experienced by the Vietnamese people partly result from the mistakes of the political leaders, such as executing the former Vietnamese president. For Minh, after this practice, negative karma has been ignited transforming the future of the country and thus the lives of the Vietnamese in an adverse way. In the novel, another example that reflects the importance of cultural beliefs in the interpretation of trauma is the belief in spirit possession. After Mai shows the first symptoms related to the dissociated identity disorder, her family do not interpret these symptoms to be an outcome of her traumatic experiences, rather, Minh and Quy assume that Mai is possessed by the spirit of their deceased daughter Khanh. Influenced by these explanations, Mai also starts to think that Khanh uses her own body as a medium to display her anger since she was not saved by her parents. Mai's attitude towards her symptoms demonstrates that even the victims of trauma are affected by cultural explanations when interpreting their symptoms. Consequently, rather than consulting modern medical treatment for Mai's psychological problems, Quy and Minh try to find a solution by calling in a traditional Vietnamese shaman to help their daughter.

Throughout her novels, while focusing on the traumatic experiences of the individuals, Cao does not isolate these experiences from the collective traumas of the Vietnamese people. Besides presenting the characters as every-person figures standing for other victims of the War in similar conditions, the collective experiences are also mentioned in the background of individual experiences. The effects of the War as a collective

experience are portrayed through disruption of the bonds among people, dispersal in high numbers from the homeland, deaths on the way to find protection, and refugee experiences in the host country. In both novels, especially the sufferings of the 'boat people' who try to leave Vietnam by sea and become vulnerable to the attacks of the pirates are conveyed within the multiple stories of the survivors. By naming the chapter about 'boat people' in *The Lotus and the Storm* as 'Exodus,' Cao builds an analogy between the historical Jewish expulsion and the Vietnamese people's departure from their homeland. Besides, both novels give place to the Little Saigon community in the U.S. where all the Vietnamese refugees wait for news about the whereabouts of their loved ones. The shared stories about their dangerous journeys to the U.S. and their experiences of War demonstrate that the survivors are connected to each other through their similar traumas.

In *Monkey Bridge,* Cao reveals that the arrival in the U.S. does not mean an ending to the sufferings of the Vietnamese as a group saved from the atrocities of the War. They become a group of people unwelcome by the Americans since they remind them of the American failure in the War. Their stories are left to be forgotten by the mainstream media and other cultural productions as stated by Mai. They are also subject to hate crimes by other people since they are thought of as inferior, which is reinforced through false rumors about the Vietnamese. Hence, as refugees escaping from the atrocities of the War, the Vietnamese find themselves collectively in an insecure position and become marginalized in the U.S. which further contributes to their trauma.

In addition to the traumatic experiences and subsequent symptoms, Lan Cao does not ignore the actions taken by the survivors to ease their pains to free themselves from the burden of traumatic experiences. Although these attempts do not bring an unquestionable end to the sufferings of the trauma victims, they are significant in demonstrating the resilience of the characters on the way to their possible recovery. By portraying the diverse ways taken by the characters to deal with their trauma and to find peace in their present situation, Cao emphasizes that, similar to a variety of responses to traumatic events, the practices for recovery also depend on various factors.

In *Monkey Bridge,* Thanh and Mai have opposite strategies for recovery in the U.S. Thanh writes a diary which includes commentaries on their present situation and her past life in the rural Mekong Delta. Thanh uses her diary as an instrument to forget her traumatic experiences by concentrating on more positive events in her life in the past and by

constructing alternative stories rather than traumatic realities. As such, the diary does not include much detail about what really happened to her family or the village during the War. Thanh presents her father Baba Quan as a caring husband and a father who devoted all his life to the benefits of his family and community with all his knowledge about Vietnamese traditions. He becomes an ideal Vietnamese peasant figure faithful to ancestral lands. As Thanh states in her suicide letter to Mai, she intentionally presents Baba Quan as an ideal figure so that he better suits her soothing imagination about village life.

In the diary, the rural area in the Mekong Delta becomes a magical place with all its natural beauty. Rather than a place which has been devastated by the continuous battles between the opposite armies, the landscape becomes a symbol of fertility with its vast rice fields. As she looks upon the rice fields to be the soul of Vietnam and, thus, an indispensable part of the Vietnamese identity, imagining their soothing appearance helps Thanh to feel more empowered at present. In spite of her efforts, Thanh does not recover from her trauma due to her traditional belief in karma and its inescapable results. However, her fictional re-constructions of a past life through an elevated language demonstrates that she is not as pathological as her daughter assumes.

In contrast to Thanh's commitment to her former life in the village and traditional Vietnamese culture which lead her to seek recovery through nostalgic and imaginary returns to the past, Mai prefers to adapt herself into American society to get past her traumatic experiences. Being a '1.5 generation' Vietnamese makes it easier for Mai to adapt as the traditions and beliefs in karma do not have as much importance for her as they do for her mother. Thus, rather than choosing a life of passivity and being considered a victim of war, Mai believes in controlling her own destiny by her actions. She supposes that without a successful adaptation into the host country, she will be stuck in the past memories and remain in a traumatized state. The college interview scene demonstrates Mai's resolution to have a life freed from traumatic experiences in the U.S. In addition, it indicates Mai's ability to put her Vietnamese background in the service of the present when needed as she adopts the strategy of the mythological Vietnamese women figures in order to feel empowered and pass the test. Finally, through her answers during the interview, Mai displays her desire to be evaluated by her intellect rather than being considered as a victim of war who is in need and to be pitied.

In *The Lotus and the Storm,* Cao underlines the power of forgiving and reconciliation with the self for recovery. However, the act of forgiving takes place only when the truth is revealed and wrong-doers are sincerely apologetic for their acts in the past. In the novel, this is achieved when Minh and his old friend Phong come together in the hospital where Phong repents and pleads for Minh's forgiveness. Although, at their first meeting, Minh rejects coming to terms with his old friend, eventually he starts to understand Phong's motivation behind his misdeeds and his sincere remorse. Besides, Phong's similar traumatic experiences with Minh and other Vietnamese individuals create the feeling that they are all victims of an historical event that has transformed their lives in a similar way. Consequently, when Minh forgives his old friend, he starts to grow more positive feelings rather than negative emotions like hatred and anger that keep him stuck in the memories of a traumatizing past.

Similar to her father, Mai also starts to develop more positive emotions towards her mother after she discovers the truth about Quy's efforts to save her family and friends. Through the confessions made by another friend of Minh, Mai discovers that Quy was not someone who always lived in a state of melancholia and isolation, rather, she was a strong person who was able to organize boats for people who were under threat in Vietnam. Hence, rather than feeling hatred which has caused her to repress all her memories related to her mother, Mai starts to feel pleasure while thinking about her mother which leads her to return to Vietnam for further steps of recovery.

Mai's return to Vietnam and her experiences there lead to her eventual reconciliation with her own self. In Vietnam, she has the opportunity to visit the grounds of her childhood memories that evoke pleasant emotions. Besides, walking in the city, she realizes that rather than a place of traumatic events, life continues in its normal pace in Vietnam. However, seeing that the city is not exactly in the same form as she has yearned for in the U.S., Mai starts to break away from the trauma of the loss of homeland. Another incident that contributes to Mai's possible recovery is her discovery of James being alive. For the first time, Mai starts to talk about her experiences with James without fear of being retraumatized or going into a trance. Together with James, Mai carries out her final duty by throwing her father's ashes into the Saigon River which, she thinks, will unite her mother's and father's souls. Through this ritualistic act, Mai is able to mourn for her loved ones. It creates a sense of relief and her final reconciliation with her dissociated self. As such, Mai's experiences, step by step, lead her to face her trauma and reconcile with her multiple selves rather than escaping from them. In that sense, the ending of the novel suggests an optimistic future for

Mai because she has come to terms with her selves and begins to think about further psychological treatment when she returns to the U.S.

In addition to individual efforts for recovery, Cao emphasizes the importance of the community as a supportive mechanism for the victims of trauma who are dispersed from their homelands. As the people in the U.S. do not readily welcome the refugees into their country, Vietnamese people form their own neighborhoods where they help one another heal their wounds. In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai emphasizes the importance of communal gatherings in multiple houses for her mother's and other members' psychology. The stories about past experiences shared in these gatherings have therapeutic effects on attendants since these similar stories connect people and eliminate their loneliness in a country foreign to their culture. The communal rituals and ceremonies around family altars also enable the Vietnamese to mourn for the loss of loved ones collectively.

Similar examples are also present in *The Lotus and the Storm*. In the novel, Little Saigon is described as a place where the refugees gather in order to feel as if in their homeland. The restaurants and markets are designed in a way to remind the refugees of Saigon. When Minh is burdened by the longing for his lost homeland, he walks in the streets of Little Saigon to be relieved. The sound of the Vietnamese music and the smell of the food bring forth positive memories of pre-war Vietnam and have curative effects on Vietnamese individuals. Besides, Little Saigon is a space for political and economic solidarity for the Vietnamese refugees. They organize protests and meetings in order to voice their problems and take action against the human right violations of the Vietnamese government. They also form informal credit associations in order to help the members of their community have a better life in the U.S. As a result, Little Saigon becomes a place of solidarity among refugees to deal with multiple traumas and to navigate their ways in the U.S.

In conclusion, Lan Cao, as a contemporary author, holds a mirror to the unspoken consequences of the Vietnam War. Unlike the authors of traditional war narratives who highlight the experiences of the American soldiers, Lan Cao sheds light on the lives of Vietnamese civilians during and after the War. Having witnessed the War and being a survivor herself, Lan Cao, in her novels, reflects on the atrocities from a Vietnamese perspective, which provides an insight into the traumas of other survivors of war. From her novels, it is understood that though the main cause of their trauma is mostly the same, the effects and coping strategies can vary depending on the individuals' experiences, beliefs and the characters' present situations. As the novels portray the traumatic experiences of marginalized people immigrating to the U.S., the aim of this thesis is to contribute to the

struggle to make their stories heard and it has utilized various trauma theories to better understand their individual and collective traumas.

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