

Hope and Healing in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

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Abstract

Thi Bui's graphic novel, "The Best We Could Do", is a powerful exploration of one journey from war-torn Vietnam. The narrative delves into the anguish of immigration and the enduring impact of displacement on a child, providing an intimate portrayal of the challenges faced by refugees. Bui vividly reconstructs her family's troubled past through poignant illustrations and heartfelt narrations, creating a transportive picture of life in Vietnam and America. The memoir is recognised for its evocative storytelling, making it a touching exploration of the search for a better future and the longing for the past. Through evocative illustrations and heartfelt narrations, Bui vividly reconstructs the troubled past of her family. The narrative explores the anguish of immigration, the lasting effects of displacement on a child, and the search for a better future while grappling with a longing for the past. This ambitious memoir not only serves as a powerful historical record but also delves into the themes of hope and healing amid adversity. As Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Pulitzer Prize winner, describes it, the book is a poignant journey that both breaks and heals the heart. "The Best We Could Do" stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of challenging circumstances. This paper strives to show the significance of graphic memoirs in academia and society and how they create an alternate history that is humane and de-centres the prevailing accounts that ignore marginalised voices.

Keywords: Thi Bui, Vietnam, refugees, immigration, historiography, graphic memoir, inter-generational trauma.

Introduction

'Comics are "polysemiotic" – composed of words and images – and are characterized by their diversity of representation and the potentially endless ways in which we tell stories about one another and ourselves.' (Nabizadeh 2019, 3).

Through graphic narratives, the traumas of the victims speak to the reader through absence or emptiness. These narratives also facilitate the connection between people belonging to different ethnicities, nationalities, religions, etc., who have suffered from traumatic events. Graphic narratives, therefore create awareness and also become a tool for reformation. This is an autobiographical works that infuse images into the medium of a memoir. Such narratives depict the trauma of the characters very deeply as it has the factor of firsthand experiences, in this case- experiences of war. it is an area where the academic discourses are few because they have never been considered valuable enough to be studied under literature. It is only now that a few people around the world have recognized the potential of the medium and used it as a

weapon to challenge the dominant narratives. A literary body of works that analyses these graphic narratives, and also debunks the misconceptions around the terms that need to be created. Critics around the world such as Hillary Chute have started analysing this medium and its potential. This paper aims to add to this literary body of discourse by showing the de-centring and connecting the power of graphic narratives.

The Second World War's reverberations swept the world and soon after that, The Vietnam War erupted. The time from 1965 to 1973 marks the United States' martial interference in Vietnam. It is known by the name "Vietnam War" in America and the people of Vietnam call it the "American War in Vietnam". The "Viet Minh" was against the idea of French colonies in Vietnam and was influenced by the Chinese and Soviet Communism. So, after a brutal eight-year war, Vietnam became free from the shackles of the French people. However, it partitioned Vietnam into non-communist South Vietnam, and North Vietnam which wanted to convert entire Vietnam into a communist nation. Frequent civil wars flared up in Vietnam due to the tries of the North to take command of the South. The condition worsened when America decided to become an ally of the South as it was against communism, and feared its spreading in the neighbouring nations. The U.S. regularly bombed the nation, even after a peace agreement was endorsed between the North and the U.S. that entitled the U.S. to evacuate. After many bombings, the communist North Vietnam won over the U.S. and this marked the end of the long war. South Vietnam was crushed in this war and suffered the most in terms of displacement, death, and carrying the burden of being prejudiced refugees in America.

Hope and Healing in Thi Bui's 'The Best We Could Do'

Thi Bui's debut graphic memoir "The Best We Could Do" (2017) was inspired by Art Spiegelman's "Maus" and Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis". It is a solemn narrative that Bui created to understand the pressures that forced her parents to run away from their homeland and seek a new home in another nation. The graphic memoir is based on her conversations with her parents about their experiences during the Cold War. It sets forth an elaborate description of her parents' terrible journey- from the horrific war experiences to the anxieties of escape after North Vietnam won the war and made it very difficult for the South Vietnamese non-communist people to exist peacefully, and from the pangs of the uncomfortable bases for refugees to becoming unacceptable residents in America. This portrayal challenges and subverts the common representations of Vietnamese people in movies and books, and also serves as a tool for Bui to understand her parents' trauma better so that she can heal herself and stop the cycle of passing traumas to the next generation. Even though the war took place in the land of Vietnam, the main and powerful narratives do not find the Vietnamese people in their discourses, instead, the American soldiers are shown to be courageous which was far from what happened during the war and the immigration of Vietnamese people. According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, the wars must not be remembered just as a part of America's racial and intellectual evocation because they are more about the struggles of the Vietnamese than those of American soldiers. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" or PTSD is a sickness that has been present and talked about since the old Greek civilizations but was only detected in modern times of the 1980s and became a part of all the Vietnamese who lived through this war.

The oversimplified American films about the Cold War depict more or less the same story of a juvenile American soldier who comes from the U.S. to South Vietnam and is stuck among other soldiers who are

inexperienced and Vietnamese. The story portrays Vietnamese soldiers and people who are addicted to drugs and very poor in terms of health. Finally, the story shows how the juvenile soldier fights bravely in the war and then goes back to his home as an altered person. Such bildungsroman is typical even in American comics and music where violence and bloodshed are glorified. Vietnam becomes just a stage for such stories which revolve around a white soldier, instead of being the focus. In addition to this, whenever Vietnamese are shown in the narrative, they are shown to be wicked and called “aggressors”. A few of the stories that emerged from Vietnamese writers took a different step toward the war by glorifying their soldiers. The common man found no voice in such narratives. The representation of Vietnamese women was worse as they were always depicted as helpless prostitutes or bar workers. The recent developments in writing or showing such historical events, however, have shifted their views towards the civilians of the wars. Thi Bui’s “The Best We Could Do” is one such example where the writer focuses on her family for placing the Vietnamese people into the historical discourse.

Hillary Chute believed that all the texts could be divided into two kinds, i.e., “the official” and “the human”. Bui’s graphic memoir falls under the human narrative which does not add to the dominant historiographies but reproduces a story of those expressions which were marginalized by the dominant discourse. Her graphic memoir proves that the study and writing of past events are “polyvocal”. By telling the experiences of her parents and putting them together along with her plagued present, Bui gives shape to the absence- the absence of life and blood from the main records of the Vietnam War. She starts her graphic memoir with the scene of birth that represents the subject of family and blood which then becomes the primary focus of her story. Throughout the memoir, Bui positions her family watersheds with dispute watersheds side by side. For example, she states that two weeks before the Tet Offensive, her sister Bich came into this world in January 1968. Her brother, Tam, was born with a lot of difficulty in the refugee camp in Malaysia in 1978. Bui also informs the reader that she was born only a few months before the Saigon Fall. Thus, by doing so, she marks her journey on the bigger map of Vietnam’s history.

For her, the victims of war are not a number but the very community from which she derives her identity. Why is it that we are not given the names of all the war dead, including those the US has killed, of whom we will never have the image, the name, the story, never a testimonial shared of their life, something to see, to touch, to know? (Butler 2009, 39)

Just like her family’s lifestyle, many people’s lives were disintegrating as the nation around them was breaking. Each person was trying to build their life again in a peaceful home. “First Television War” was the phrase coined for the Vietnam War because it was broadcast internationally and people stuck to their television to get day-to-day updates about how many soldiers died in the war. The news and wrestle of giving birth to babies and how many of them were born during the war gained no coverage.

Another example where Bui juxtaposes her family milestones with the war milestones is the birth of her father. She narrates the story set in a village on the far side of Deo Mountain called Loi Dong in the 1930s. Her great-great-grandfather came to this village with his son in a poor state. The father wooed a wealthy woman with his charms and also found work whereas his son was always rejected in the family. He grew up to marry a simple woman and had a baby in 1940 who was Thi Bui’s father. This happened when the Second World War had already started. Through her panels, Bui puts together the difficulties of

her father's birth and upbringing with the chaos of the war. France had fallen to Nazi Germany and as Japan and China were fighting, Japan stopped the Chinese stock paths to Vietnam. Consequently, the people lacked resources and fought to survive, as evident in the illustration where Bui's grandmother is shown to be distressed while she cooks and feeds her baby at the same time. The panel where Bui showed her father as a young boy rejecting his father on one side, and the atomic bombing of Japan by the U.S. in August on the other side depicts his father's loss of the only person who loved him i.e., his mother during the acute famine. Bui's father's childhood was anything but secure and loving. His father was abusive and drove away his mother from the house and later abandoned his son as well to join the Viet Minh because they were offering free food. The equal size of both of these pictures in the panel breaks down the idea of dominant events and suggests that both of these events were of equal importance. The disowning of his father by Bui's father Nam was as catastrophic as the bombing of Japan.

Thi Bui has also questioned the popular and biased perception of the Vietnamese people through the incorporation of the photograph of the Saigon Execution which painted the portrait of Vietnamese people in dark colours. The photo was clicked by Eddie Adams and showed Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc gunning down a Viet Cong convict in his head. This image immediately became popular and made the General look like an evil person in America. He lost his job and home, but people did not try to know the entire story behind the photo. The convict had killed a whole family in their house just a few hours before the photo was clicked. Even though the photographer Eddie Adams got the Pulitzer Prize for clicking this picture, he felt a lot of remorse while taking it as he knew the complete tale behind the photo which was not present in the photo itself. She concludes that according to the American biases, there were three types of people in the war, i.e., the 'good people' represented by the Americans; the 'bad people' depicted by the Viet Cong, and the 'South Vietnamese immigrants' who were portrayed as corrupt, physically weak, and poor people. Women were shown as sex workers. Bui takes up the absence of clarity and gives it shape through her memoir. She does not mean to take sides with either of the people involved in the shooting but means to show that there is always more to what we see and read. Similarly, she means to show that there is more to the story beyond the prejudices of people.

Bui also included real snapshots in her graphic memoirs from her family's time in the Malaysian refugee camp. There, every refugee was reduced to just their respective boat numbers and collectively they were called the "boat people" because they travelled across the ocean in uncomfortable, small, and crowded boats without clean water and food for days to find a safe place to stay. Their difficult journey, however, was never addressed and was summed up into just two words. By adding her family's photos along with their boat numbers in her narration, Bui breathes life and its struggles into an otherwise uncomplicated story. The real photos remind the reader that the story is about real people, as argued by Butler that photos touch the reader's heart. Therefore, this graphic memoir adds to the counter-narrative body of works. Bui chose the graphic memoir form because she is an illustrator by profession, and she needed something that would present her familial history in a "human and relatable" manner. Traumas are arduous to present through words, and several sentences are not able to attain the desired result that a single page of a graphic memoir could achieve. 'Panels' and 'Gutters' help to create such kinds of effects in a comic. The framework of the comic is comprised of the panels whereas the empty spaces in between such frames or panels are known as gutters. Through these gutters, the comic gives the presence of the absent things in

the narrative because these empty spaces are full of incomprehensible traumas and complexities of the refugees.

[Comics] makes readers aware of limits, and also possibilities for expression in which disaster, or trauma, breaks the boundaries of communication, finding shape in a hybrid medium. With its juxtaposed frames, comics constantly call readers' attention to what they see or don't see, and why . . . We can say that its very grammar, then, evokes the unsaid, or inexpressible. Comics highlight the relation between words and images – and therefore address the nature of the difficulty of representing extreme situations and experience. (Chute 2017, 34)

The panels record the historical events, and the gutters' blankness portrays the consequences of these historical events. The voice, pain, and trauma of the refugees; in this case, Bui's parents, scream through the gutters in silence. It is for the reader to comprehend these traumas for which no words would ever suffice. The unity between these two elements, therefore, gives sense to the graphic memoir. The simple, raw language along with the realistic and beautiful illustrations used by Thi Bui moves the readers' hearts, leaving them in tears in certain instances. For example, in Chapter Four of the graphic memoir "Blood and Rice", Thi Bui's illustration of her father as a young boy depicts how much he was abused and traumatized by his father's act of sending away his mother. The words of the panel only tell that it was the last time that Nam ever saw his mother, but the image of the young Nam crying and his father trying to restrain him shows his grave sorrows. The graphic memoir also utilizes the technique of creating 'Bleeds' to represent an event or thought of great significance. A Bleed is an illustration that fills the entire page till the border, and the page which this image fills is known as the 'Splash Page'. For example, the last page of Chapter One "Labor" in 'The Best We Could Do' is a splash page that shows a turning point in Bui's life. She realizes that having a baby is a big responsibility, and for the first time in her life, she feels a strong sense of empathy for her mother. Another important splash page is in Chapter Two "Rewind, Reverse" where Bui draws a bleed of herself looking towards an island in the ocean. She comes to another vital realization that to overcome her intergenerational trauma, she needs to track down her journey back to her homeland that is Vietnam. In simple terms, this means that she needed to talk to her parents about their entire journey and know more about her homeland which she left when she was very young.

The frame included the prevailing rhetoric that brushed aside the other realities. Since the bleeds have no frame, they represent the idea of looking at the marginalized things that do not find a space in the framework of historiography. Bui converges the main and the subaltern; the heard and the unheard; the events and their consequences on the psyche of people with the help of the graphic memoir form. We find that the use of dull colours also sets the sepia mood of the memoir is painfully beautiful, as the memoir is about trauma and eventual healing.

'Through its interrogative perspective, the memoir generates alternative representations of cultural identity, family relationships, and embodied knowledge, refusing to silence the spatial, affective, and epistemological power of memories crossing generations of diasporic subjects.' (McWilliams 2019, 328–29).

As asserted by Cathy Caruth, the traumas always come back to pester the victims. Even after the war is over, the ‘war within’ stays. The subconsciousness of the survivors maintains these horrific events and manifests itself in their actions and behavioural patterns which Bui calls in her memoir the “Refugee Reflex”. After having to go through so many troubles to survive, the survivors lose interest in ‘life’ altogether. Most of them live on for their children or just for the sake of living. Thi Bui represents this by narrating the experiences of her parents, which is just one of the millions of other such stories. The main aim of creating this graphic memoir for Bui was to unearth her parents’ past so that she could free herself of the anger that she felt toward them for not protecting her mind and heart from war traumas. She visited her homeland for the first time in her twenties after her family’s escape in 1978. After this visit, she realised that she could lessen the space between herself and her parents if she could lessen the space between the past and the present. Therefore, she started asking her parents the “right questions” that would enable them to spill out their painful stories. She wanted to look towards Vietnam as her home instead of thinking of it as something far and gone. Bui narrates that she had always been scared of her father while growing up. Her childhood was spent with her father in a bleak orange apartment in San Diego, California. Her mother took up the job of assembling circuit boards after they were denied other jobs. Their degrees were unrecognised in America. So, while her mother went out to earn, Bui and her younger brother Tam spent time alone with their father. Her elder sisters, Lan and Bich used to go to school by themselves. By her description of her father, we can deduce that he was frustrated by the lonely life of America. He was addicted to smoking and used to narrate horror stories to young Tam and Bui which terrified them. His bouts of anger could surface over time, as evident from a panel where he hits Tam for running around while playing.

He also used to bring posters of naked women that scared and confused the two young kids. Bui does not blame him for doing all these things as she concluded that he could not protect them and make them feel safe from the outer world and his demons. Tam used to hide in the wardrobe for many hours and it became his coping mechanism to hide from the things that terrified him. However, the pictures tell us that the things that terrified the kids were not terrifying at all. Tam developed a fear of the naked woman in the painting and the “shadows” that knocked on their door. These shadows were none other than people who came to convince them to convert. The kids did not understand that and their father was so preoccupied with his trauma and misery that he could not explain it to them that those things were nothing to be afraid of. The parents did not care to filter the content that the children could access as is evident from the fact that Bui used to read her father’s books about the supernatural and that they did not have a bedtime schedule. Since both of her parents never showed their fears to her and remained as hard as rocks, Bui too started pretending to be strong to overcome her fear of the things that she did not understand. However, at the bottom of her heart, she wanted to be free of these fears not by running away or “closing” her eyes, but by facing them. Her relationship with her mother was more complicated. Even though she took care of her, she was mostly absent from her life as she was busy providing for the entire family. Even at the time of Bui’s son’s birth, we could see that her mother was absent when Bui was looking up to her for support. She came after her son was born. Bui also developed resentment toward her mother after finding out that she had a lovely childhood- the kind of childhood that Bui never had but only craved.

Her childhood experiences led to the transmission of trauma, slowly and unknowingly. The intergenerational trauma that we see in Bui as an adult wrecked her living. She remained unhappy and

confused most of the time. In Chapter One “Labor” we see doubts in her mind about having a baby. Her traumas were unresolved and she was scared to fail as a parent as her parents did. She thought so, at least at that moment. However, she took a leap of faith when she decided to finally resolve her intergenerational trauma by knowing what caused it. Her conversations with both of her parents opened a door toward healing for her as well as her parents. Bui delved into her father’s childhood and found that life was unjust toward him since the day he was born. All of his stories were different in context but had similar endings of loss. He lost his mother when he was just a boy, and his father did not care about him. In 1945, Frenchmen returned to assert their dominance over Vietnam. War erupted between the two nations. French soldiers shot everyone that they saw and made the lives of the natives a living hell. Bui’s father’s village also suffered due to this. The situation became so intense that Bui’s father had to be hidden in a dugout to survive. He crossed a swamp and reached a small, suffocating hole where he stayed alone with little rice and water for days. The small boy listened to the screams of women and children being murdered above the ground and waited for someone to come back for him. His mind was filled with doubt and he remained anxious if he would be saved. Luckily, someone did come to rescue him after the situation calmed down.

Another incident that Bui’s father witnessed that traumatized him was the execution of Viet Minh in his village by the French soldiers. Finally, her father had to leave his village to find a safer place when he was just seven years old. He spent his entire childhood in constant fear. Bui realized, then, that the man she lived with in that bleak orange apartment was still that little petrified boy. He did not feel safe at any instant of his life, and thus, was not able to provide that sense of protection and security to his children. That is how he passed on the trauma to her daughter, who admitted feeling like a child near her parents even after growing up. What she did not realize was that the safety which she expected from her father was unknown to him in the first place. On the last page of Chapter Four, we see Bui making peace with her father when she shows him these panels. Her father seems solemn but we see a sense of relief and calm on his face as he speaks to her. Bui’s mother’s childhood, on the contrary, was memorable. She has a loving father who sent her to expensive French schools and let her enjoy life to the fullest. She recounts going to Tranh’s village for vacations where she ate to the fullest and played all day. When she grew up, she became a patriot and hated the Frenchmen so her father admitted her to another school at her request. There she excelled in everything. Her dream was to become a doctor before she married or had children. However, her life fell apart when the war between the North and the South became intense. In 1965, after she had married Nam, the Americans started bombing Vietnam. Resources became scarce and people were under constant surveillance. Their children were born amidst all this chaos. The burden fell upon Bui’s mother as her father did not help in parenting. The trauma of losing two children also haunted her mother. When living became impossible in a nation of constant bombings, Bui’s family decided to escape to the Malaysian camp by boat. Her mother was pregnant with Tam at that time. The journey was terrible but even in those terrible times, her mother was resourceful. She is depicted as a strong character through her actions. However, on the inside, she carried these traumas and they became apparent in situations that reminded her of her past. For example, she could not be there to support Bui during her first childbirth because it reminded her of the six painful childbirths, she went through. After they reached America as refugees, they were treated as “others” and were not welcomed anywhere. They built their new home after many sacrifices and struggles in California. Bui enumerates that her parents taught her how to respect others, and how they need to take care of each other.

'I suppose the book is an offering. It is an offering where our community has a lot of wounds. And it's important to be able to talk about them so that we can heal.' (Bui 2018d).

These were the things that they aimed to teach their children. Along with these also came the unintentional things that they adopted while trying to survive. Such traits and coping mechanisms that became embedded into Bui's parents' psyche were called the "refugee reflex" by her. Bui adopted the same as she became conscious of their unpredictable position in the world. For example, one night in their apartment, they heard a crash outside. Instead of going outside to see what happened, they locked the door and went to hide. Bui was fourteen at that time, and her reflex was to "evacuate". When they went outside, they found out that it was just a small fire started by an old couple mistakenly.

Conclusion

Thus, Thi Bui's refugee reflex is an example of intergenerational trauma that is passed on from the survivors to their children as these survivors are never able to survive the mental consequences of the war even after surviving physically. It was her child that pushed Bui forward to break the cycle of passing on trauma. The phrase "empathic traumatisation" has been used to explain the endeavours of the children to connect with their parents by listening to their grim stories of the past. After listening to her parents' heartbreaking journey, Bui became more loving and sensitive toward them. It helped her pinpoint the ache and then heal it by pouring it all out with the help of ink, paper, and pictures. The last chapter of the graphic memoir depicts acceptance of the trauma by Bui to heal from it. She finally recognises her mother's struggles when she becomes one. She asks her mother about the loss of her children while her newborn son is sick and has to be kept in an incubator. After their conversation, a panel is shown with no words, but just an illustration of Bui hugging her mother. This was the moment when they put aside their guilt and resentments to embrace each other. Even if "I love you" would always be "stuck" in their throats, both of them would still feel it. The title of the graphic memoir defines Bui's realisation that her parents tried their best to give their children a life where they could be free. She saw and became grateful for what her parents did for her in those times of crisis, instead of blaming them for what they didn't do. Bui also accepted the fact that traumas of such great intensity do not vanish and that she would have to bear some pressure from her parents' past forever. She could not change the past, but she discovered that her present was a gift from her parents. Just like they did their best to put food on her plate and a roof over her head while protecting her from the war, she needs to protect her son from past wounds. Bui also sees that Vietnam does not belong to her in the first place, as her parents were always moving in search of a home when she was born. She stopped thinking of it as a symbol of loss.

The narrative, therefore, shows an alternate reality where each life matters. More than anything else, it is about family. The lack of communication between parents and children could hinder the healing process. The eclipsing of parents' hardships also eclipsed the efforts that they put into parenting even after going through those hardships, and the children always felt deprived of love, care, and emotional stability. Once Bui recognized this lack, she set off to bridge it and succeeded in the end. The last panel of the memoir gives closure to the reader by portraying Bui's ten-year-old son being free from any damage and pain of the past. Bui gives an illustration of her son swimming in the water which could be juxtaposed with young Bui's dream where she wanted to be free, but could only swim in the dark waters of her "holding pen". The war within finally began to subside.

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