

Parent-Child Relationships in Multicultural Texts: A Study of *Maame* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Abstract

Parent-child relationships have become one of the most affected aspects of parenting in multicultural societies, especially for immigrants, with families struggling to blend in with the culture of host societies. This paper investigates how multiculturalism influences parent-child relationships in diasporic novels, comparing situations in Jessica George's *Maame* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The paper recognizes extant research on parenting and parent-child relationships in multicultural societies, especially in the texts used for this paper's analysis. It also acknowledges that multiculturalism is scarcely used by literary scholars in comparing multicultural parenting, which forms the basis for this study. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative research design utilizing textual analysis by closely reading the novels to provide instances of parenting and parent-child relationships. Multiculturalism and Attachment Theory serve as the theoretical framework for the analysis. The study finds differences in parenting styles in the novels, which are shaped by distinct elements of multiculturalism, such as language barriers and war in Ocean Vuong's novel, and acculturation, socio-economic disparities, and generational gaps in Jessica George's novel. However, immigration serves as a common determinant for parenting and parent-child relationships. The findings also reveal that negative parenting practices, such as neglectful and authoritarian parenting styles, affect the attachment styles of individuals, making them develop insecure attachments that influence parenting and the parent-child relationship. The study concludes that parenting in multicultural settings challenges traditional parenting models, and the implications of this should remain a continued area of research for literary scholars, while creative writers should endeavor to draw awareness to these situations as well.

Keywords: Attachment Theory; Parenting Styles; Multiculturalism, Multicultural Literature, Parent-Child Relationship

Introduction

Literature's role in shaping society by mirroring various aspects of human life, questioning human behavior, while conditioning human experiences cannot be overemphasized. It not only entertains but also educates and provokes thought with insights into personal and social issues such as parenting. On the importance of literature, Jamgbadi writes that through "creative works and worlds of literature, the writer gets the raw materials from the world around him or her, imbues them with the properties of literary creativity and gives the finished product back to the society as a reflection of the actions of men and women" (124). In this way, literature contributes meaningfully to public discourse on parenting, identity, and emotional well-being.

Multiculturalism has emerged as one of the many focuses explored by literary scholars in contemporary literature. According to Suleiman, multicultural literature provides a fertile

ground for exploring characters' experiences in multicultural societies (130). This assertion is further corroborated by Cai, who notes that it is a genre of literature that reflects experiences of individuals and communities from various cultural backgrounds, with works containing themes related to identity, heritage, conflict, and adaptation within a multicultural society (315). Multicultural literature aims to give voice to marginalized groups and challenge dominant cultural narratives.

The impact of multicultural literature is grandiose as it runs from promoting empathy and understanding by allowing readers to step into the shoes of characters from various cultural backgrounds to understand their experiences and changes. Multicultural narratives play the role of entertainment agents and instructors, with authors from different backgrounds such as Amy Tan (*The Joy Luck Club*), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Dream Count*), Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*), and Khaled Hosseini (*The Kite Runner*), infusing themes of parenting and parent-child relations in multicultural settings through their writing. These multicultural authors reveal immigrants' experiences, as well as the generational gaps that exist between parents and children, cultural hybridity, and emotional effects. Literature, in its exploration of parenting, shines a light on how parenting is a big deal for parents in these societies.

In multicultural narratives, particularly those rooted in diasporic or cross-continental settings and experiences, parenting is influenced by certain factors and aspects, and parent-child relationships become affected as a result of issues centered around cultural clashes, expectations, and generational gaps. Parenting, a global practice, is described by Maher and Komaijani as a factor necessary for nurturing and teaching individuals the right values, which in turn make them functioning members of society (46). For this to happen, parents have to perform the role of molders, shaping children in ways that influence them emotionally, psychologically, and physically (Baumrind 112). Apart from holistic development being an important result of parenting, the relationship between parents and children itself is also a crucial result, reflecting emotional, cultural, and social dynamics. One of the key ways this exploration takes shape is through parenting styles, defined by Cueli et al. as specific patterns of behavior and attitudes that parents use to raise their children (303). These styles, which are introduced by Baumrind, include authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Each style has distinctive features and effects, and they all affect parent-child relationships in one way or the other.

According to Popov and Ilesanmi, parent-child relationships take a different form from every other relationship (253). It is just as important, however, that each degree of intimacy goes a long way in determining a child's behavioral conduct and emotional outcomes. In this vein, Toor acknowledges that the relationship between parents and children is influenced by several factors, which include culture, social expectations, and children's developmental stages (39). Popov and Ilesanmi connect the outcomes of parent-child relationships, find them to have positive or negative socio-emotional effects, cognitive development, and physical and social well-being (257-258). Camalame posits that parents in multicultural settings often struggle to reconcile traditional values with new cultural expectations, a tension that strains family dynamics.

Iqbal emphasizes the importance of understanding how individuals navigate life in a culturally diverse society, linking to the struggles that parents face, as he focuses on the

challenges of life in such environments (98). As Hensley observes, this is particularly relevant for immigrant parents, who face difficulties reconciling their cultural heritage with the values of the new culture, which often manifests in intergenerational conflicts and socio-economic challenges (143). In some cases, parents adopt strategies that blend traditional values with modern ideals; however, others struggle to reconcile these differences, often resulting in intergenerational conflicts (Chao 186).

Multicultural factors affecting parenting and parent-child relationships also extend beyond cultural clashes and intergenerational issues, as the process of assimilation forms the structural conditions under which families function, thereby affecting the quality of life and, extensively, the nature of parent-child relationships. With cultural dissonance being a core reason, other factors such as socioeconomic instability, language barriers, legal status, and limited access to healthcare and education play critical roles in impacting immigrant parenting (Lim et al. 2876). As Iqbal notes, navigating life in a multicultural society involves continuous negotiation between adapting to external systems and preserving one's inner sense of identity and belonging (98). This negotiation is especially difficult for immigrant families, where children often acculturate faster than their parents, leading to a reversal of roles and a strain on traditional power structures within the home.

Consequently, immigration introduces a complex web of structural and emotional challenges that redefine how parents and children relate to each other, making the parent-child relationship in multicultural societies both a site of connection and a space of tension. Therefore, Multicultural literature serves as a powerful vehicle for representing and interrogating these tensions in literary analysis. The role of literature in advancing multicultural understanding has been supported by educational studies such as the one conducted on Arab Muslim English teachers in Israel, which found that exposure to multicultural texts increased cross-cultural understanding, critical awareness of injustice, and personal empowerment (Baiduri et al. 1017). Multiculturalism, as a framework, helps explain how parents manage this tension, revealing how the need to balance cultural preservation with adaptation shapes parenting strategies. This clash between tradition and adaptation often results in hybrid parenting practices that shape both parent-child relationships and children's well-being. Together with attachment theory, the attachment styles of parents and children will be explored to examine how they affect these relationships and, in turn, influence the development of characters in Jessica George's *Maame* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

Scholarly interest in parenting styles within literary studies has grown in recent years, often focusing on how parental behavior shapes character development and emotional outcomes. Kurnia and Asnani's analysis of *Everything, Everything* reveals how authoritarian parenting manifests through strict discipline, one-way communication, and punitive control, all of which affect the protagonist's psychological development (148–153). Likewise, Risqi and Ekalestari explore the film *Joker*, demonstrating how authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles contribute to the protagonist's mental illness and deviant behavior (14–22). These studies illustrate the connection between parenting styles and psychological outcomes, but they rarely consider broader sociocultural contexts. Some literary analyses have examined the effect of parenting on specific familial dynamics. Lidya and Soelitsyo focus on the influence of parenting styles on the mother-daughter relationship in *The Astonishing Color of After*,

concluding that parenting style strongly determines emotional closeness and conflict (436–443). In addition to parenting styles, a few studies investigate attachment in literary analysis. For instance, Marplina's analysis of *The Secret Garden* and Ulogu's study of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Forest Dames* attempt to bridge parenting and attachment theory, yet they provide limited engagement with the cultural or multicultural dimensions of these relationships (60–70).

Regarding multiculturalism, relevant literary scholarship tends to explore cultural hybridity, identity, and societal conflict without explicitly addressing parenting. Ula and Anam's analysis of *The Kite Runner* examines the failure of multiculturalism in Afghanistan, focusing on discrimination and social division through Hybridity Theory (129–140). Paul Mousumi takes a migration-focused approach to the same novel, analyzing how Amir's cultural identity evolves in the United States, thereby highlighting the diasporic experience (220–223). While insightful, both studies ignore parenting's role in shaping or transmitting cultural identity. Tran Thu Ta's thesis on *White Teeth* contains a comparative approach to multiculturalism by examining identity formation across three multigenerational families in Britain. Though the study reveals the complexity of multicultural identity, it falls short of analyzing how parenting styles mediate these identities. Collectively, these studies highlight the literary relevance of parenting, attachment, and multiculturalism as separate areas of inquiry. However, they reveal a notable gap: few studies examine how parenting styles and parent-child relationships function within multicultural contexts or how these dynamics shape psychological development and identity. This study responds to that gap by integrating parenting styles, attachment theory, and multiculturalism in a literary analysis of *Maame* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to aid the understanding of how multicultural factors and parenting practices influence parent-child relationships and emotional development in Jessica George's *Maame* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The primary method of analysis is the Textual analysis method, which involves close reading to systematically examine dialogues, passages, and descriptions that succinctly illuminate instances of the dynamics of parenting, attachment behaviors, and multiculturalism.

Thematic analysis is also used to identify and interpret recurring patterns related to parenting styles (authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, neglectful), attachment outcomes (secure, anxious, avoidant, disorganized), and multicultural challenges (assimilation, cultural identity conflict, language barriers). The selected texts were purposively selected because they sufficiently portray the impacts of multiculturalism on parenting and parent-child relationships and other aspects of the protagonists.

Theoretical Framework

The paper employs Multiculturalism and Attachment Theory as its dual theoretical frameworks for a literary examination of how parenting practices and parent-child relationships are shaped by multicultural tensions in *Maame* by Jessica George and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong. As interdisciplinary theories, both theories apply to analyzing literary works, and they are suited for analyzing parenting within diasporic or immigrant narratives, where the

pressures of immigration and cultural forces affect the attachment of parents and characters, which form their relationship and other aspects of their lives.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism as a concept refers to the coexistence of diverse cultural groups within a society, where cultural differences are acknowledged, respected, and often integrated into the social fabric (Fenster 9). Originally, the term began as a theoretical framework for understanding and managing cultural diversity in various ways to promote inclusion and equity. In reaction to growing globalization and cultural variety, multiculturalism emerged as a key framework in literary theory in the second half of the 20th century, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. A change occurred during this time to value and recognize the contributions of non-Western literature as well as the experiences of underrepresented communities. In the context of parenting, multiculturalism examines how cultural backgrounds, traditions, and social environments influence parenting practices and parent-child relationships.

The paper makes use of multiculturalism concepts and components that aid in the understanding of diversity and the challenges individuals face in a multicultural society. It recognizes that individuals are faced with confrontations that may exist in the form of diffusing one particular culture with another culture, and this may affect society and people in diverse ways. The analysis follows Kumar's assertion that an immigrant society is the only one to practice multiculturalism because they are faced with cultural confrontation and other socio-economic factors during integration (12), recognizing the novels for their immigration theme. The acknowledgment and incorporation of various cultural viewpoints into literary studies is known as multiculturalism in literature.

Multiculturalism as a theory and framework emerged in response to the increasing recognition of cultural diversity in modern societies and the need for equity and social cohesion (Marpelina 66). It emphasizes both the coexistence of different cultures and the importance of mutual respect, understanding, and social justice. This makes it particularly relevant to studies examining identity formation, family dynamics, and interpersonal relationships across diverse cultural backgrounds. Multiculturalism connects with Attachment Theory, as parenting is influenced by culture but also subject to change in diverse settings. Multicultural literature helps us understand how cultural change impacts emotional bonds, independence, and well-being by showcasing these shifts in parenting practices.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is a psychological theory on the emotional relationship humans form with others, particularly in close relationships (Monorajani and Sripadmadevi 38). The theory is a psychological framework developed by John Bowlby, which was later expanded upon by Mary Ainsworth. It emphasizes how early childhood experiences shape people's connection with others throughout life. It exists in literary criticism as a psychological rationale for the emotional and interpersonal relationships that unite people, examining the relationship between parents and children right from infancy or childhood, and how this becomes responsible for parent-child relationships.

Bowlby and Ainsworth link children's attachment to their caregiver's ability to be present or attentive to their needs during the infancy stage, all of which results in one of three attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent.

Secure attachment: This attachment style is associated with parents who provide constant care and respond to their children's needs. As these children with secure attachments get older and form relationships with other people, they have healthy relationships and emotional well-being.

Avoidant attachment: Karen connects this attachment style to having emotionally unavailable and distant parents (60). The caregivers under this style are seen as unaffectionate and repulsive to physical touch and care. Scholars such as Hazan and Shaver associate the avoidant attachment behavior to the constant need for care or attention, which becomes rejected by parents, making these children also shy away from the same (68).

Anxious-ambivalent attachment: This attachment style is found in children with inconsistent parents, who are available when they deem fit. Due to this inconsistency, Karen asserts that children develop anger and trust issues towards parents and, in the long term, their relationship with others (69). These children are faced with constant worry concerning the lack of parental availability, leading to dependence on other people and the longing for comfort and connection at all times (Karen 69).

Attachment theory provides an avenue for readers to understand how attachments influence individuals' emotions, the consequences of unhealthy attachments, and an opportunity for healing the inner child. Hughton-Faryna relates individuals' attachment to the attachment of their parents, particularly caregivers (174). Thus, there exists a cycle as children mirror their parents and begin to repeat the emotional pattern they perceive from their parents. Children internalize perceived emotionally unavailable behavior from parents. This behavior tends to carry on long-term as children grow up to become secure or insecurely attached adults in their relationships with romantic partners and other people. In contrast, individuals with insecure attachment have unstable relationships, mainly characterized by clinginess and poor communication. (Guerrero et al. 450). The study speculates that parenting styles influence attachment type, which affects the kind of relationship children in multicultural settings have with their parents. However, it also finds out how cultural factors contribute to these developments.

Textual Analysis

Parenting and Parent-Child Relationship in *Maame* and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

The analysis of parenting in the novels for this paper is grounded in Diana Baumrind's classification of parenting styles. Baumrind identifies three primary parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive—later expanded by Maccoby and Martin to include a fourth: neglectful or uninvolved parenting. These styles are defined along two key dimensions: *demandingness*, referring to the degree of behavioral control or discipline expected of the child, and *responsiveness*, referring to the level of emotional warmth and support provided. Authoritative parents are demanding and responsive, setting clear expectations while maintaining emotional attunement to their children's needs. In contrast, authoritarian parents are high in demandingness but low in responsiveness, often relying on strict discipline with little room for dialogue or emotional expression. Permissive parents are the reverse, combining

high responsiveness with low demandingness, often avoiding discipline and allowing children significant autonomy. Finally, neglectful parents score low on both dimensions, providing neither structure nor support, which often results in significant developmental harm.

In *Maame*, Jessica George reveals a fractured style of parenting, indicating a form of parental disengagement where parents are emotionally detached from their offspring. The protagonist, Maddie, and her brother James grow up, fending for themselves psychologically due to the absence of any meaningful emotional or physical support from their parents. Her mother's absence is a combination of physical and emotional, representing a gap in maternal presence during critical developmental stages. Her absence began when Maddie turned 12, with her having to go to Ghana as a form of sacrifice, putting finances over family affairs. She travels annually, returning only when there is a window. This emotional and physical neglect graduates to a lack of consistency in parental care and financial neglect as Maddie begins to shoulder the financial burden of her family members right from a young age. She recounts an incident where her mom calls begging for monetary assistance:

Once, I was in a lecture at uni and Mum called me in tears because bailiffs were at the door threatening to take the TV. We had arrears of just under a grand. I'd gotten paid that day—from my bookseller job—and had to hand it all over with a bit more from my student loan. I remember the relief in my mum's voice when I gave my card details over the phone to the collector. (152)

Even during the periods when she reunites with her family, Maddie's mother fails to provide warmth or emotional connection to her children. This lack of involvement significantly affects James, who increasingly distances himself from his family, choosing instead to spend time with friends. Seeking the parental warmth absent in his own home, he becomes emotionally detached, frequently missing family events such as birthdays and Christmas celebrations in favor of spending time with his friend's family from an early age.

Maddie's father, though physically present, offers little in terms of nurturing. He retreats into his personal routines, rarely engaging with his children on a meaningful level. Even prior to his Parkinson's diagnosis, he adopted a passive role, contributing little to his children's emotional development. Maddie internalizes this detachment, interpreting her well-behaved nature not as an achievement but as a condition for being left alone. This implicit expectation that she self-manages without guidance is a key feature of neglectful parenting, one that deprives her of both affirmation and structure. Her father's behavior reduces their relationship to cohabitation rather than caregiving, stripping their interactions of the warmth typically associated with parenthood. These patterns of disengagement emphasize how neglect can occur not just through absence, but through emotional silence and unacknowledged dependence.

Attachment and Parent-Child Relationship in *Maame*

Neglectful parenting in *Maame* led to the formation of an insecure, anxious-ambivalent attachment style in the protagonist, Maddie. The emotional inconsistency by her mother and her father's emotional distance leads to an internalization of deep-rooted anxiety and a hypervigilant need for affection. Maddie clings to distant memories of preadolescent maternal

care, which she uses as an emotional anchor during her adult life. Her attachment is evident in her compulsive expressions of love, which she mentions to her therapist, “I also say ‘I love you’ a lot. Is that weird?” This reveals a compulsive drive for emotional reciprocity, a major feature of anxious-ambivalent attachment (258). This information causes her therapist to make her think deeply about whether her constant verbalization of her affection is intertwined with the absence of parental care from her childhood. When asked who she tells I love you to, Maddie replies, “Oh, not everyone. Family and friends.” Angelina, the therapist says, “And maybe people you want to love you back?” (258). Her therapist’s probing questions reemphasize Maddie’s lack of reassurance in childhood, which age indicates has a contributing effect to her persistent longing for validation. The relationship she has with her parent is therefore a strained and anxiety-driven one.

Maddie’s anxious attachment to her father becomes most evident during his illness. Her reluctance to move out, despite overwhelming responsibilities, shows a desire to make up for lost intimacy and care. Following his death, she experiences anxiety, guilt, and panic attacks, symptoms of unresolved attachment trauma. During her therapy session, she complained about the responsibility she encountered growing up.

In respect to attachment theory, the nature of Maddie’s relationship and her parents is one saddled with emotional inconsistency, limited responsiveness, and unmet psychological needs that inhibit the development of secure attachment in both Maddie and her brother James. Maddie’s attachment to her parents, particularly her mother, is shaped by a lack of emotional availability, inconsistent caregiving, and an absence of warmth, which are common in insecure attachment styles. Attachment Theory emphasizes the importance of a responsive caregiver who consistently meets a child’s emotional and physical needs, especially in early development. Maddie’s experiences contrast with this model. Without a secure base, Maddie and her brother developed coping mechanisms rooted in either hyper-dependence or withdrawal. Maddie’s constant self-blame, her tendency to suppress emotional needs, and her desire to earn affection through over-functioning are psychological residues of her insecure attachment.

The relationship between Maddie and her parent becomes strained from her upbringing to the point where Maddie and her mother barely have any close relationship. Culture contributes to this relationship, especially because Maddie’s mother was raised with the notion that children and their parents cannot be friends. She expects her daughter to comply with her views and respect the hierarchical nature of their relationship. This extends to sharing information, where she expects Maddie to share everything with her, even though there is a vivid absence of emotional support and reciprocity on her part. As a result, Maddie feels uncomfortable opening up about her inner world, leading to her emotional withdrawal and difficulty trusting her mother with personal concerns. Maddie’s relationship with her mother can be described as avoidant, with her avoiding mentioning different things to her as a result of fear and anxiety.

A Multicultural Analysis of Parenting Styles in *Maame* Immigration

First and foremost, Maddie’s family members are immigrants from Ghana who relocated for greener pastures. According to Shandy, Ghanaians in the past and modern times were forced to

leave Ghana in search of better opportunities due to economic forces such as political and financial instability (965). Most Africans who leave the continent seek better opportunities, including education, political freedom, economic opportunities, or relief from discrimination in their home countries.

Migration is a double-edged sword for several first-generation African migrants because while it provides economic opportunity, it also comes with cultural displacement, racial discrimination, and the pressure to maintain ties with their home country. Maddie's parents, especially her mother, embody this immigrant mindset, where survival takes precedence over emotional well-being. They view work as a means to an end, prioritizing stability over personal happiness. This mentality is shaped by their experiences as Black immigrants in 1980s Britain, where racism and economic hardship limited their opportunities.

The socio-economic context of migration, therefore, directly shapes the parenting style of Maddie's parents. They adopt a survivalist approach to life, one where emotional expression and parental involvement are secondary to financial contribution, especially with limited resources available. This is evident in Maddie's mother's prolonged absence while running a hostel in Ghana, and in her father's long hours and emotionally detached presence at home as a result of his job as a high school security guard. For immigrant parents like hers, parenting becomes transactional: children are expected to be resilient, obedient, and self-sufficient, often taking on adult responsibilities at an early age. This is not necessarily due to intentional neglect, but rather a byproduct of systemic constraints and economic precarity.

Intergenerational Conflict in Immigrant Parenting

The novel portrays a clash between Ghanaian parenting traditions and British cultural values. There exists an intergenerational conflict between Maddie and her parents, especially her mother, as a result of having different cultural expectations and life experiences. This form of tension exists between immigrant families, where the first-generation parents strictly uphold their traditional values, and the second-generation children are influenced by the culture of their host culture, leading to a rift as both parties have different worldviews.

One of the most evident conflicts between Maddie and her mother is different views on work and career choices. Maddie's mother believes that a good job provides financial stability, regardless of personal fulfillment. In contrast, Maddie wants a career that makes her happy:

I'd wanted to leave the CGT before my probation period was up seven months ago, which spat in the face of my parents and grandparents' work ethic. My mum said it was a privilege I had the opportunity to jump from job to, albeit low-paying, job... she doesn't see jobs as something to be enjoyed but rather endured in order to pay bills—the completion of which should spark some semblance of joy. For Mum, work-related happiness is directly proportional to how much you earn... (20)

Another generational gap that leads to conflict is the prioritization of strong will over mental health. Maddie's mother displays a form of emotional distance by her failure to acknowledge Maddie's mental health struggles. This is tied to her upbringing in Ghana, where mental health is often overlooked, and emotional strength is valued over vulnerability. On

several occasions, her mother tells her to seek God, and she tries to dissuade Maddie from going to a guidance counselor's office. This emotional suppression is a common feature in immigrant parenting, where parents who have endured hardship expect their children to be resilient without acknowledging the different social pressures they face in a multicultural society.

Maddie also narrates that privacy was a core value upheld by her family, rooted in African cultural norms. In many African cultures, there is a strong emphasis on preserving the collective image of the family, particularly in public spheres, and on avoiding the disclosure of personal or familial matters outside the home. Growing up with this mindset felt natural to her until her exposure to the more individualistic cultures in the UK led her to perceive this value differently. A sense of alienation began to emerge as she observed that others, particularly through media and the school environment, idealized the concept of having a best friend with whom one shares everything. This created a cultural clash between the expectations of Maddie's upbringing and the norms embraced by her peers. As a result, Maddie began to experience feelings of isolation and misalignment with her peers, leading to an increasing reluctance to form close friendships. This tension is emblematic of the immigrant experience, where the younger generation faces the challenge of balancing the pressure to preserve traditional cultural values while adapting to the more individualistic culture of their new environment.

Acculturation: Integration

Acculturation is the process by which individuals or groups from one cultural background adapt to and adopt aspects of another culture, especially when they come into continuous first-hand contact. This often happens in multicultural societies, immigrant communities, or when people move between countries with different cultural values and norms. The healthiest form of acculturation, according to Berry, is integration, which involves maintaining one's original culture while also engaging with the new one.

In the context of *Maame*, Acculturation in parenting is in the form of integration, where Maddie's mother, although slowly, begins to gravitate toward the individualistic British culture after releasing the damage her parenting has done to her daughter. This begins after she gets called after Maddie had a panic attack during a therapy session. A conversation between Maddie and her mother reveals that misunderstandings between parents and children often occur in immigrant families. Maddie realized that her mother always assumed she was okay in the UK while she stayed in Ghana. However, Maddie makes it clear that this is a misconception:

I know you loved your father in a way James and I failed at; I truly thought you were okay here, that you wanted to stay at home and not that you felt you needed to. Then you spoke of anxiety and hopelessness, it was like you were depressed, and after your phone call, it haunted me. I prayed and prayed and thought maybe the answer was to get you out of the house, living your life. Now look. The result is you blaming yourself for your father's death... Yes, I have made many mistakes. (264)

In many African cultures, especially Ghanaian culture, certain values such as obedience, sacrifice, and duty are regarded as core for children, especially female children. Maddie's

willingness to stay home, help with caregiving, and avoid trouble appeared to her mother as signs of contentment and maturity, especially since she never got complaints from her daughter. However, growing up in a Western context, where emotional expression and personal fulfillment are emphasized, Maddie internalized this silence as suppression and an emotional burden, which forms the relationship she has with her family.

However, there seems to be a cultural shift when Maddie's mother realizes her mistake, a rare possibility in African parenting. She recognized that the parenting methods that made sense in her cultural upbringing did not translate well in a new context, where her daughter's silence was not a strength, but emotional distress. This leads to a major cause for acculturation as her mother begins to acknowledge her mental health struggle and realizes that it is beyond prayers or finding a husband. This acknowledgment shows that she is beginning to adapt to the host culture's emotional norms by seeing her daughter as not just an extension of cultural values but an individual shaped by a hybrid cultural reality. Initially, her resistance to counseling is grounded in deeply rooted religious and cultural values: "I didn't like the idea of strangers—Godless strangers most likely—directing you" (56). However, when she realizes that therapy is much needed, she succumbs by not entirely rejecting her beliefs but recalibrating them to suit her daughter's needs and the evolving norms of their new environment, where mental health care is more normalized.

Parenting Style in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Although *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a multicultural novel that explores the experiences of immigrant parents, the parenting style, parent-child relationship, and the multicultural factors influencing parenting differ significantly from those in *Maame*. In *Maame*, Maddie's parents migrate to Europe for socio-economic opportunities, while in Vuong's narrative, the protagonists—Little Dog and his mother, Rose—are refugees of the Vietnam War. Their relationship is deeply complicated by trauma, displacement, and mental illness—factors that go beyond standard parenting frameworks.

While Western parenting theories may not fully capture Rose's behavior, her dominant parenting style aligns with Diana Baumrind's authoritarian model, marked by emotional volatility, strictness, physical punishment, and a lack of verbal reasoning. One of the most prominent expressions of this style is her frequent use of physical discipline. Little Dog recalls, "The first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning" (17). Rose is portrayed as controlling and quick to anger, inflicting physical harm without explanation. For example, she hits him with a remote control, throws a box of chicken legs at his head, and once shatters a ceramic teapot on his face. Rose's violent tendencies are not without context. Her mother, Little Dog's grandmother, explains: "Your mom. She not normal, okay? She pain, she hurt. She want you. She need us" (117). These words reveal the depth of Rose's psychological trauma. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder and shaped by a life of war, displacement, and poverty, Rose's violence stems from unresolved pain and a distorted attempt at protection. Her harsh parenting reflects the intergenerational trauma of marginalized, war-torn communities.

Despite her abuse, Rose also exhibits signs of care, working tirelessly in a nail salon under exploitative conditions, developing arthritis from physical labor, and sharing bedtime stories with Little Dog. Vuong writes this contradiction with tenderness, showing that Rose's

love is tangled with her trauma. Little Dog internalizes this confusion by growing up with the idea that love is inextricable from pain. However, although Vuong writes of parenting with contradictions, he does not excuse Rose's behavior, but rather reveals how authoritarian parenting, especially in immigrant and trauma-affected families, cannot be understood in binary terms. Vuong invites readers to see parenting as shaped by culture, trauma, history, and survival, not merely as a reflection of parental attitude or intention.

Cultural and Multicultural Factors Responsible for Parenting Styles in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

In the novel, there are cultural factors that are responsible for Rose's parenting style. Similar to *Maame*, immigration is a factor, however, there are other factors, such as war and language barrier.

War Trauma and Post-War Identity

Rose and her mother, Lan, were present during the Vietnam War in the 1960s, which affected their mental development. Little Dog mentions that Rose watched her high school collapse after an American napalm raid and that most of her childhood was clouded by gunshots, frequent bombings, and fire. This translates to PTSD, which mirrors Little Dog's childhood. He says: "I read that parents suffering from PTSD [illegible] are more likely to beat their children" (9). Rose's survival-oriented mindset affects how she raises him. She sees the world as a dangerous place, making her parenting style a trauma-informed survival tactic. Trauma affects the past and present. Rose, who is in the present, is affected and lives in the past. This makes her unable to love her son and be normal, as she feels more like a monster instead of a mother:

The time, while pruning a basket of green beans over the sink, you said, out of nowhere, "I'm not a monster. I'm a mother." What do we mean when we say survivor?
"You're not a monster," I said. But I lied. (36)

This dialogue is evidence that she finds it difficult to control her actions. War has so affected her life that she behaves without control. Rose tries to rationalize her actions to her son by telling him that she is not a monster, even though she is irrational. This conversation occurs after she picks up a knife, almost harming him, but tells him to get out before she hurts him. Vuong agrees with this, as Little Dog does, that Rose is not a monster—just sick, traumatized, and unable to cope with it.

Immigration and Displacement

Rose is also stressed out, being a Vietnamese immigrant in America. She faces racism and language barriers, for example, her inability to speak English frustrates her and makes her dependent on Little Dog for navigating American systems. In a way, the parenting becomes reversed, as Little Dog tries to navigate life for her. After they go to the restaurant to get oxtail but they receive a different order because of language barrier, Little Dog vows to learn the English language:

That night I promised myself I'd never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family's official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. (39)

On one occasion, when Little Dog tries teaching Rose to read but she becomes violent:

The time I tried to teach you to read the way Mrs. Callahan taught me, my lips to your ear, my hand on yours, the words moving underneath the shadows we made...After the stutters and false starts, the sentences warped or locked in your throat, after the embarrassment of failure, you slammed the book shut. "I don't need to read," you said... (17)

He notes that "that act (a son teaching his mother) reversed their hierarchy, a taboo in Asian principles. Rose tries to overcompensate for the loss of authority by asserting control through physical discipline. Moreover, being an immigrant and someone who was forcibly displaced by war, the unfamiliarity of America proves to be overwhelming, making her react with surprise, anger, or isolation. She later tells Little Dog to learn English to protect himself, as she could not do that for him. This signifies her love and concern for Little Dog.

Attachment and Parent-Child Relationship in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

In the novel, Rose's parenting style affects Little Dog's attachment style. His attachment style becomes anxious-preoccupied, based on the inconsistency of love in an unpredictable and unsafe way. He learns to hold on tighter, to over-function emotionally, and to over-accommodate even when hurting. He displays this attachment style by caring for Rose out of an understanding that her violence is rooted in trauma and not cruelty. His empathy for his mother's pain keeps him afloat because he chooses to believe that "memory is a choice, even though it is a flood." The memory drowns him, yet he still carries his mother's pains.

His relationship with Trevor mirrors his relationship with his mother. Little Dog feels hyper-responsible for the emotions of others. He blames himself for Trevor's discomfort during sex, even though nothing is wrong. He writes, "I had tainted him with my faggotory, the filthiness of our act exposed by the body's failure to contain itself" (156). Despite Trevor being emotionally unavailable, a druggie, and a homophobe, Little Dog remains with him, tenderly, hoping for more. Similarly, he stays emotionally bound to his mother, even after years of violence. This pattern of enduring terrible relationships signifies a fear of abandonment, showing that he would rather accept crumbs of affection. He tries to earn the love of people who are inconsistent in showing their love. His inner working model already made him view relationships as something that comes with pain, as a language of affection.

Although Little Dog craves love, he rejects tenderness when offered. Thus, when Trevor tries to hold him after sex, he pulls away, and he writes that sometimes being offered tenderness feels like the very proof that you're not worthy of it. Love that comes with gentleness feels dangerous, so he develops a form of emotional self-protectiveness, which he learns from childhood.

Nature of Parent-Child Relationship in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the relationship between Rose and Little Dog is fragmented. The relationship is fractured and intimate, violent, yet tender, revealing the kind of relationship that exists as a result of trauma. Ocean Vuong writes about their relationship through layers of contradiction. For example, Rose is an abuser and a parent, while Little Dog is a child and a translator. Their relationship defies simplistic categorization, meaning that it is neither purely vertical nor horizontal, but dances between dominance, independence, and yearning for stability. The closeness in the relationship between Rose and Little Dog is not built through softness and comfort, but survival, shared experiences, and co-dependence.

Despite the abuse, Little Dog still feels a deep affection for his mother. He understands her, and this is why even after telling her to quit abusing him physically, they stay together. Their relationship, however, can be viewed as unhealthy and suffocating.

A Little Dog is aware his mother loved him, even though she never says it, he explains:

It's true that, in Vietnamese, we rarely say "I love you" and when we do, it is almost always in English. Care and love for us are pronounced through serve, plucking hairs, pressing yourself on your son to absorb a plane's turbulence, and therefore, his fear. (32)

This illustrates that love was not a thing that had to be said. As a part of a collectivist culture, even though they did not say it aloud, it was the littlest things that counted as love.

Conclusion

This study has examined how multiculturalism and attachment influence parent-child relationships in multicultural contexts, using Jessica George's *Maame* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* for its analysis. Both novels reveal that parenting in the diaspora is often marked by cultural dissonance, emotional detachment, and unspoken trauma. These conditions challenge conventional family structures, forcing characters to renegotiate intimacy, identity, and belonging within fragmented cultural spaces.

The findings of the analysis in this research align with research that aver that multiculturalism provides an avenue for the understanding of parenting and parent-child relationships in immigrant contexts. It shows that parenting in African diasporic cultures is affected by immigration and intergenerational conflict and the processes of integration, which lead to neglectful parenting that puts a rift between parents and children. However, parenting can be mended through a process of partial acculturation, as seen in Maddie's mother's positive response to Maddie emotions at the end of the novel. In contrast, Asian-American parenting is authoritarian, but it cannot be put in a categorical type. It displays elements of high and low responsiveness. Based on this, a trauma-based approach to parenting is encouraged to be included. A shared language barrier becomes a factor in shaping the parenting in the text.

Both novels, however, contain similar cases of poor parenting, which result in an unhealthy parent-child relationship. Maddie and Little Dog are representatives of the evils of unstable parenting in multicultural societies. The findings underscore the importance of

literature as a means of understanding and critiquing the use of ineffective parenting styles. Hence, parents must endeavor to form better relationships with children, starting from adopting suitable methods, as this not only impacts them psychologically but also makes the world a better place. This paper adds to literary criticism by showing how multicultural parenting affects emotions and relationships.

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