The Vietnam Shaped Hole In Thi Bui’s Chest

Where you come from will always leave a mark on you no matter how hard you try to forget it. The graphic novel *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui tells a story of her and her family escaping Vietnam to better their lives. Vietnam was being destroyed by the Americans and was no longer a home for many families. This family in particular had many struggles and needed to break free from the war zone. Bui’s family was trying to survive the tough times, but her parents made the decision that it was time to escape for the sake of their kids. Although the kids were all so young when they became refugees in America, they still all had memories and thoughts on their so called “home” back in Vietnam. They had moved to San Diego, California and had more struggles just trying to fit in. They were refugees and where they came from would always have to be apart of their life. No matter how far Bui’s family escaped they would always being carrying the memories and affects from Vietnam on their backs. In *The Best We Could Do*, the author demonstrates that past trauma will always have an effect on the future journey of parents and children of generations to come and by passing along emotions from country hardships.

When a country goes through trauma or is affected by something greater, it not only hurts the country but also the people there. In the novel Bui tells us the trauma that goes on and the damage being done to Vietnam. Not only was the county being torn apart, but the people there were being pushed away from their homes and families. Things were being destroyed and people
were getting hurt “For my parents, there was a rocket that barely missed their house.. And killed a neighbor.. Best friends and students killed in combat” (Bui 209). Innocent people were watching lives being taken away from family and friends who did nothing to deserve it. The countries problems were ruining the lives of many others. They did not feel safe in their so called home and needed to escape, “We were more like ants, scrambling out of the way of giants, getting just far enough from danger to resume the business of living” (Bui 186). The people of Vietnam had to go about their lives avoiding the danger surrounding them just to survive. They did not even feel human with the mess going on around them. This country brought so much trauma to families and children growing up there. Even at a young age, those kids would grow up with the thought of their past home and carry on those horrible memories forever. In an article regarding refugees, the author states, “This family’s journey is maddeningly slow and constrained by a byzantine set of rules. They’re refugees escaping to America from a region America burned to the ground, and Uncle Sam doesn’t tend to make such a process easy” (Riesman). These people of Vietnam had to get up and move their entire life around battles of their country. Bringing no belongings, and hopefully staying connected with families, they had to leave the place they called home because of the war surrounding them. They were forced to become refugees and nothing came easy to them. In 1965, “American planes carpet-bombed a country dependent on agriculture with napalm and the defoliant Agent Orange”, the entire county was covered in these horrible bombings and families all around were affected from these horrible actions (Bui 200). From the Vietnamese point of view, this trauma would be passed along many generations trying to rebuild a life in a new place they now would call home.
It is possible that you were never even part of a trauma, but the generation before you carried it along and dragged you into it. In this graphic novel there are many examples of the parents past affecting their kids in the present. Bui’s parents had a very tough childhood and it only showed more as they grew older and became parents. Although the family made it out of Vietnam, they would carry those haunting images in their mind forever. Bui’s father, Bo, had a very tough childhood and turned him into the terrifying father he was “Afraid of my father, craving safety and comfort. I had no idea the terror I felt was only the long shadow of his own” (Bui 129). Bui never understood why her father acted the way he did, until she later found out about Bo’s past. Her father’s past scared him mentally and held him back from being the great father he could have been. The trauma Bo went through shaped him into who he was and how he acted to his family. Even though nothing physical was still happening, he would be mentally changed forever. The impacts of the past showed and the family was affected deeply: “I had never, before researching the background of my father’s stories, imagined that these horrible events were connected to my family history” (Bui 116). After looking at the war going on in Vietnam and Bo’s childhood with his father, it now all made sense why Bo was the way he was. He had been through so much and there was no way to get rid of those memories. Bo showed his trauma through his parenting styles, “Mm, You know how it was for me. And why later I wouldn't be.. normal” he told Bui with a disappointed face (Bui 130). It is very had to build a happy family when you have been through so much, not able to hide those memories. In research done, they had proven that trauma from the Holocaust survivors may physically be passed down from one generation to the next. Just like some disorders or traits in the body, trauma may show in offspring of survivors “it was shown that children of survivors had higher levels of anxiety if
their parents had suffered from PTSD. Children whose survivor parents did not have PTSD had less anxiety” (Kelley Kim). This article helps show that mentally and even physically trauma from one's past, may be passed along to their kids and affect them as well. It is a serious matter as to how a parent reacts to horrible situations, also how that parent exposes their child will affect how they grow up. Parents have a huge impact on future generations and what will become. Whatever trauma they go through will be carried along side them and show in their behaviors amongst others.

The author also shows examples of parenting affects through her mother Ma. The graphic novel shows the relationship between Bui and Ma as complicated. Bui was grateful for Ma and loved her but as she grew older there was some distance, “In those photos, Ma looked like someone I wanted to be as a little girl” (Bui 135). Ma did the best that she could and was always there for her family, but you could tell that something was holding Ma back from being a greater mother. As Bui got older she finally started to understand her mother more: “Maybe Ma felt judgement coming from me, or maybe she felt uncomfortable talking to our family about her former life” (Bui 136). Ma had a snobby, rich mother who treated people horribly as a child. Later becoming a mother of her own, Ma had to put all the traumatic childhood memories and try to start up a family (Bui 142). Once the Bui had a child of her own, she compared herself to Ma and decided how she would change her way of being a mother. Bui did not want to see pain from herself when looking at her son “But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don't see war and loss, or even Travis and me… and I think maybe he can be free” (Bui 328). The author tells her life story and where she is now because of all that her and her parents went through in the past.
When looking at your parents, you see how they act and you decide how you will be when you become a parent. Thi Bui realized she did not want to become like her parents. Children have a lot of growing to do and they learn how through their surroundings and parents. It makes it hard on children when a parent shows their trauma and acts upon their kids. Parents from a hard past mentally are different and seem as if their past is still holding them back. Bui knows the struggles her family went through but it still shows even as refugees in America, she says, “And though my parents took us far away from the site of their grief… certain shadows stretched far, casting a gray stillness over our childhood” (Bui 59). Even though the family moves all the way to America, they are still haunted by the Vietnam hardships they see in their minds. Bui has fears of becoming like her parents after watching them raise her. Their trauma has now scared her, and she wishes to have her son free, “What has worried me since having my own child was whether I would pass along some gene for sorrow or unintentionally inflict damage I could never undo” she looks at her son and does not see any loss or war (Bui 327). Her family had been through so much and finally being in America she still feared of the life they once had. In the article, “An Illustrated Guide To Escaping the Vietnam War and Making it in America”, the author tells Bui’s thoughts about how it was hard to fit in into America. She references the image of Vietnam shaped hole on her back, “And that if I could see Viet Nam as a real place, and not a symbol of something lost” (Oatman). She grew up to believe that Vietnam was not her home but a place she had created to be false, “It wasn’t a country that I lost that I could ever gain back. It was a country that changed over the course of my parents’ lives, and they became incompatible with that country. So really it wasn’t my country at all by the time I was born there” (Oatman). This article relates back to the trauma as a child verse now how she
acts and thinks in the present. Being older she has learned a lot, but Bui will always carry that hole in her chest of Vietnam.

In conclusion, Bui’s family went through many struggles and became refugees to better their future. Even though they escaped to America they would always have the trauma showing through their actions. Whether they noticed or not Bui’s parents exposed them to the life that they once had. Having to survive in the tough times of the Vietnam war, the family had each other to get by. The war immensely impacted many families and friends, taking innocent people away from their homes. Having to bring children into refugee camps and being smuggled into America is something that will always be apart of them. Parents also have a major impact on their kids when raising them. Through their emotions they show what trauma they have been through. These hard times will also be shown in generations to come while trying to build that life back up. More generations will be exposed to past trauma though members that survived it and the impacts of oneself. Going through traumatic experiences change your mentality and how you may behave in the future.
Works Cited


