

Psychological Trauma Presented in *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh and *PACO'S Story* by L. Heinemann

Ha Phuong Nguyen and Tuyet Thi Hong Mai
Hanoi Pedagogical University, Vietnam

Abstract: Based on the theory of comparative literature and the theory psychological trauma suggested by of C. Caruth and A. Gotlib, we have compared psychological trauma in *The Sorrows of War* (by Bao Ninh) and *Paco's Story* (by L. Heinemann). These are two works th Psychological Trauma, comparative literature, *The Sorrows of War*.at portrayed the image of soldiers during the Vietnam War (1954 - 1975). They all had terrible experiences during the war and all had psychological trauma after the war. These psychological traumas were manifested in the nightmares they had each day, in the sudden shivers, or in the feeling of being lost when they returned to normal life. When Paco (in *Paco's Story*) tried to escape the pain, Kien (in *The Sorrow of War*) accepted to face it. For him, writing was like a way to get rid of psychological distresses and heal himself. Moreover, while in *Paco's Story*, there is no psychological trauma of the community, in *The Sorrow of War*, this is presented very clearly. It has shown the tragedy not of an individual but of an entire ethnic community when the storm of war swept over. Our research, therefore, is an anti-war voice, with a deep appreciation for the value of life and peace.

Keywords: Psychological Trauma, comparative literature, *The Sorrows of War*.

INTRODUCTION

War is a recurring theme throughout the history of literature. People have exploited many aspects of war such as war motives, war heroes or human beauty in war. But war is an abnormal state of life, or the most extreme experience, therefore, each passing war leaves people with a psychological distress and lead to lasting psychological trauma. These pains will then torment people forever. To be able to find the motivation to go on and to be able to live peacefully, people need to be freed from psychological obsessions and literature can be a possible solution. From this perspective, we conduct research on the issue of Psychological Trauma in *The Sorrow of War* (by Bao Ninh) and *Paco's Story* (by L. Heineman). Although written by two authors in two countries far apart in terms of geographical distance, these two works depict the central image of soldiers who had faced death and were lost in life. live in the present. They had nightmares every day and had to find a way to heal their own psychological trauma. Thereby, we can see the universal trauma of people after war.

RESEARCH METHODS

To conduct this research, we employed on two fundamental theories, namely comparative literature theory and literary trauma theory.

First, comparative literature study created a foundation for us to compare the psychological trauma in the two works. As we all know, comparative literature is a research direction that compares two or more literary phenomena in two or more countries, thereby seeing similarities and differences between those two literary phenomena.

In comparative literature, there are two main types of research, influence studies and parallel studies. Influence research (study of direct relationships) is the use of historical methods to deal with the relationships that exist between different ethnic literatures, the basis of which is the exchange and contact/ Pa between national cultures. In contrast, parallel study (Parallel study/ Parallelism) is the study of two or more different phenomena or literatures that do not have a direct mutual relationship. The two literary phenomena (*The Sorrows of War* and *Paco's Story*) that we conduct a research on here are two independently created phenomena with no direct relationship; therefore, they can be seen as independent or parallel literary phenomena. The similarities between them are the influence of the laws of literature and the laws of life.

Second, in this article, we mainly used perspectives of psychological trauma suggested in the literature of Cathy Caruth and Anna Gotlib. These were the leading authors of literary criticism in this field. They helped bring the theory of trauma from the realm of psychology to the realm of literature. Through articles on the theory of trauma, Caruth and Anna Gotlib presented the definition of trauma, the mechanism of formation and operation of trauma as well as the manifestation of trauma in literary structures...

In this article, when examining psychological trauma in two works *The Sorrows of War* by Bao Ninh and *Paco's Story* by H.Heineman, we have combined studies on trauma from a comparative perspective to find out a new approach to these

two works written about soldiers after the Vietnam war.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Theory of Trauma in Literature

Generally, trauma is often understood as physical damage caused by external forces acting on the human body and easily recognized by humans. Nevertheless, psychological studies have shown that, in addition to such trauma, people can face emotional trauma, which are much more difficult to recognize and persist in the mind, leading people to actions that they themselves do not expect or cannot resist.

So what is "trauma"? C. Caruth in the article *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* stated: "Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events to which the response often appears in the form of hallucinations. and intrusive phenomena are often delayed and recur uncontrollably" [Ninh, B, 2009]. As Anna Gotlib put it more clearly, trauma "is not simply fear, guilt or unwanted memories; trauma is a total force that disrupts our worlds, leading to a state of losing the world. It draws a sharp line between the "before" and the "after": the world "before" means before the fall of man, or "the self" while the world "after" is the remnant of a world of life that has been destroyed' [Caruth, C, 1991]. Thus, if physical injuries can be quickly recovered in a short time, then mental injuries can affect people for a very long time. They haunt people's minds, making it impossible for them to live peacefully. They make people's lives fork in another direction, and they even destroy people's lives.

So how can people rebalance their own lives? Of the many ways of liberation, we believe that writing is one of the best. Previously, S. Freud thought that writing literary works is actually a way to release psychological hidden memories. For traumatized people, this is even more important because the trauma they experience often sinks into the unconscious and subconscious mind, but it will return again and again in people's dreams and be sometimes pushed to the conscious domain. It has tremendous potential damage. Therefore, in order to get rid of that hurtful state, people must liberate by confiding and sharing. Writing is a way of expressing themselves and returning to equilibrium.

Bao Ninh and L. Heineman – The authors of two novels *The Sorrow of War* and *Paco's Story* are

both soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War. Memories of war have caused damage and loss in their souls. As a matter of course, they turned to literature. Their characters are not only "human tasters" but also individuals struggling to heal psychological trauma in their souls. Below, we will compare the psychological trauma of the characters in the two novels to give readers a new perspective on the works as well as provide an additional document to observe people as victims of war.

Manifestations of Psychological Trauma in *The Sorrow of War* (by Bao Ninh) and *Paco's Story* (by L.Heinemann)

Bao Ninh is a Vietnamese writer, he joined the army from 1969 to 1975 and fought in the Central Highlands. Published in 1990, *The Sorrow of War* (also known as *The Fate of Love*) is the writer's greatest work. The work is about Kien and Phuong's opposite love, about terrible experiences Kien had in the war and about the lost soldiers when stepping out of the war. Since its release, the book has received the attention of domestic researchers. The writer Nguyen Ngoc considered *The Sorrows of War* "a novel about fiction", while the researcher Pham Xuan Nguyen stated: "In Vietnam, since the publication of *The Sorrows of War*, people no longer describe the war like before" and the poet Pham Tien Duat wrote: "The whole novel is a sad sonata - a noble and pure sadness". Around the world, the novel has been translated into 15 languages with 18 versions so far, so it can be said that the novel has had an "international influence". Even in the United States, *The Sorrow of War* is widely taught in universities, ranking among many other prestigious works, and holding a prestigious position in schools.

Meanwhile, *Paco's Story* is a novel by L. Heineman - an American writer. In 1966, while studying at university, he was called up to the army and fought in Vietnam from March 1967 to March 1968 in Cu Chi and Dau Tieng. After being discharged from the army, he studied and then taught the subject of composition at Columbia University in Chicago. In 1986, he published *Paco's Story*, which then won the National Book Award for Fiction. When this book was translated into Vietnamese by Pham Anh Tuan, it was writer Bao Ninh who wrote the preface to it. That has shown the connection and the harmony between the two writers and the two works.

Psychological Trauma in Soldiers after the War

War is a terrible experience that perhaps very few people want to go through. War has created a shock in the human psyche “to which the reaction to the event often appears in the form of hallucinations and intrusive phenomena are often delayed and recur in an uncontrolled manner.” ” (according to Caruth). In 1975, Bao Ninh was discharged from the army, but the horrifying memories of the war still haunt him. Thus, *The Sorrow of War* unfolds with all its cruelty, tragedy, and horror as they were in the real war. Death, hunger and cold, “clothes torn and tattered from sores and people like leprosy” [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019], the desertion scene took place for hours and was likened to an epidemic that “spread throughout the platoon, like vomiting, unable to stop”. Death appears everywhere, in various forms and all are tragic, haunting the readers. At the beginning of the novel, a massacre completely wiped out an army unit: all were burned by na-pan bombs, went crazy, and fell into the sea of fire. “Blood splattered, hair flowing, gurgling, smudging. On the diamond-shaped glade in the middle of the field, the glade that is heard to this day has not yet had the soul to grow while the body is broken and drizzling with heat” [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019]. Obsessed with such a terrifying battle that he returned to a peaceful life for a long time, Kien still could not forget the brutal battle at Call Hoon field in which his “independent 27th battalion” “was completely annihilated and only “ten lucky people are still alive”. The battle was extremely brutal, but what it left behind was even more terrifying: “In the following days, crows flew in the sky, and after the Americans withdrew, the rainy season fell, flooding the forest. The battlefield turned into a swamp; the dark brown water floating with red scum. On the surface of the water floated bodies of people lying on their backs, burnt and swollen animals, mixed with branches, leaves, and small and large tree trunks that were chopped by firecrackers. When the flood subsided, everything emerged in the muddy wrapped in a thick layer of filthy mud like rotten meat” [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019]. Because of that, the memory is heavier, the present is crushed under the shadow of the past, Kien is imprisoned by the horrible memories of the battle at Sa Thay River, in the Xa Meat hill: “And who read it? Kien has the opportunity to imagine the rain on his legs and hands falling flat on the elephant grassland on the banks of the Sa Thay river at dawn after a night of continuous blanching. You can see with your own eyes the slopes of Xa Saut hill after three days of

bloody battle and look exactly like a roof covered with corpses” [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019].

Like Bao Ninh's character, in *The Story of Paco*, writer Harry Heinemann built the image of the soldier Paco who came out of the war after being seriously injured “whose body was full of deep cuts, big blisters and blisters. filled with water, and the legs were broken and broken” [Gotlib, A. et al] but the war memories still seem to be intact in that person's mind with blood, corpses, bullet casings, “there are days when we just want to throw it all away and run away – then we have absolutely nothing to do but fear and wait and give up.” p.40]. In one battle, “everything within a twelve-kilometer radius burned to cinders, everything reeked of coal ash, bone marrow and anything that caught fire; everything, including military ranks, scraps of meat, letters from the house, pieces of sandbags and backpacks and MPC money, forest rubbish and corpse garbage - everything outside the edge of the forest looked like a rust-colored vomit” [Gotlib, A. et al]. The screams of fear of the soldiers were described by the writer as “our screams pierced the ozone layer, through the arctic light looked like the curtains of a coffee shop.... the screams.... that penetrates all the way to God's Eternal Universe.” The cries, the heavy breathing, the wounded begging for water, calling for the doctor. Indeed in the battlefield, the line between life and death is too thin, every day someone dies in battle. The battlefield became a field of dead bodies. “It is miserable and disgusting to die like this” [Gotlib, A. et al]. At this point, Paco himself was very badly injured “the water oozing from the excruciatingly painful wound on his head got into his hair and scalp, causing him to itch terribly. By mid-afternoon, his body was full of flies, attracted by the stench emanating from exposed flesh sores that had already begun to become infected with just the touch of pus- black buffalo flies, tiny colored maggots. transparent, the mosquito's eyes bite like a strong pinch” [Gotlib, A. et al].

In *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh, Kien was a lucky person who survived until the day of peace, but the legacy of war he suffered was terrible. A few sketches of his appearance partly revealed a severely wounded soul: “He is tall and thin, with an ugly face, taciturn, with a savage look. His skin was dry and dark, riddled with holes, tanning, speckled with gunpowder, his lips pursed. On the cheek, a bullet shot straight through a groove close to the bone” [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019]; “Your look is discouraging. A gaze that sees nothing, blank,

emotionless” [Herman, S.B. *et al.*, 2019]; “*His brother is tall, broad-shouldered, but thin, with bad skin, an exposed neck, a face that looks straight ahead, it's not beautiful, it's rough, it's thick with wrinkles, it's tired, and it's sad*” [Herman, S.B. *et al.*, 2019] This is a portrait of a man who has experienced a lot of suffering and has an unstable and unhappy inner life. He said “*Up until now, I have endured one memory after another, day after day, night after night, how many years has it been?*” [Herman, S.B. *et al.*, 2019] The hauntings of the past were dead, painful, always coming back to torment him. During the night, hearing the sound of a ceiling fan, Kien mistakenly thought it was the hiss of a propeller. While watching TV, seeing American soldiers wearing armor going to battle, ironically, made Kien excited “*as if ready to re-enter himself with fire scenes, blood scenes, wild and distorted killing scenes. soul and identity*” [Herman, S.B. *et al.*, 2019]. Kien's “transformation” as a ward writer, looking to the act of writing is the release of pressure beyond the tolerance of the legacy of war and salvation. Although he is a “low-level” – or ward-level writer, he is “crazy”, gets immersed in alcohol day and night, stays away from all the noise and grabs going on around...; but his pages written with dreams, flickering, forgetting to remember is a way of paying past debts, expressing gratitude to teammates, expressing repentance and awakening humanity. With Kien, writing becomes an act of self-destruction, writing to find The consciousness in him could not control the chaotic world of the unconscious and subconscious. Intense memories of war often come suddenly, making him always live in panic. The pain is recalled; it hurts much more than the last time. Unable to run away from that memory, Kien has become a “weird”, immersed in alcohol, into a “warrior writer” who is crazy. In a state of trauma, Kien does not know who he is, and now turns into a journey back in time to find his youth, he bitterly realizes that: “*So my life is actually different from a boat swimming upstream but constantly being pushed back into the past. For me the future lies far behind*” [Herman, S.B. *et al.*, 2019].

Larry Heinemann, through the story of the main character - Paco, has helped countless American veterans in the Vietnam War to tell their own fate and that of their generation. Paco returned to his hometown with bruises on his body and heart-heavy confidants about the war that he didn't know who to tell. During his days wandering across American towns, Paco's only companion was a

cane that helped him walk after his injuries destroyed his body. Meeting many people curious about his seemingly bizarre crutches, he just quietly replied that he was injured in the war. As the sole survivor of the entire company, Paco was luckier than his other teammates, but the legacy the war left him was terrible. Physically, Paco often suffered from writhing pain, and had to constantly use special drugs to combat persistent injuries on his body. The work describes in detail and clearly the feelings and post-war sequelae that Paco had to go through for the rest of his life. Physical wounds can heal, but emotional trauma is something that is hard to get rid of in a veteran's life. Like other soldiers who fought in Vietnam, Paco was always haunted by the cruel past that he personally had to go through. Feeling guilty, nightmares often appeared in the soldier's mind: “*There were nights when Paco dreamed of executions. A group of soldiers including him were led down a narrow, brightly lit corridor – hot water in the water pipe overhead hum; the floor was painted gray steel color, glossy like water. The group of soldiers were led into a small bare concrete room which was overcrowded like in a rush hour elevator*” [Gotlib, A. *et al.*]. It seems that he has never been able to enjoy a complete happiness and joy. The days of war being exhausted on the battlefield were followed by a post-war era filled with drudgery and tedious work. The customers looked at him like a weird, eccentric waiter. Many girls expressed curiosity mixed with contempt for a strange identity - a strange monster. At the end of the work, Paco is still alone wandering the streets, going to the West, with a completely unknown future.

Besides such many similarities, the personal psychological trauma presented in the two works also has certain differences. If Paco's terrible obsessions (in *Paco's Story*) focus on a few main events, Kien in *The Sorrow of War* is painful about many things during his time on the battlefield. One of the most terrible obsessions with Paco is the fact that a whole group of American soldiers raped and killed a small, stunted Vietnamese girl. The meanness and despicableness made all of them more like animals than people. To this day, Paco still vividly remembers her dull, lifeless face, as well as the huge red mark on her spine. The death of the poor victim was also very upsetting. And it seems that later on, the whole team of ninety-three soldiers, in which only Paco survived, was the karma for that barbarism. But if you read *The Sorrow of War*, you can see that the nightmare

seems to stretch from the beginning to the end of the work. There are scenes that seem clear and bright, but are actually a preparation for future pain. For example, the scene about Kien and Phuong's pure love at Buoi school - during their school days, seemed to create a comparison with Kien and Phuong later, after Phuong was raped on the train that took Kien to the battlefield. Remembering good memories makes it more painful and miserable. Besides, the way for the soldiers to get out of the psychological obsessions in the two stories is also different. While Paco chose to hide and to seek food so that no one knew about him, Kien tried to face the pain. He accepted nightmares as a part of life and he sought to relieve them by writing. He wrote the novel to free himself. He went to visit his teammates to see many other lives like him. Therefore, it can be said that both Kien and Paco are in the world that E. Hemingue calls the "throwaway generation", but they are living with different attitudes.

Community's Psychological Trauma

The Vietnam War was a war that took place in the country of Vietnam, so in the novel *The Sorrow of War*, there exists a community's psychological trauma – a problem that cannot be found in *Paco's Story*. This is the main difference when we compare the manifestation of psychological trauma in the two works.

Perhaps, many American soldiers after participating in the war on the battlefields, including the Vietnam battlefield, encountered terrible psychological trauma. Therefore, the Americans had to resort to the intervention of psychologists. In *Paco's Story*, not only does Paco suffer from psychological problems, but the doctor who is treating Paco himself is more or less having the same problem. Every day, facing a lot of dead bodies and injured people being in a state of half-life with rotten meat and a bad smell that scares his hands: *"I quit my job. When that damn helicopter gets here, I'll go and you can't stop me. I won't come back here and you can't make me come back. I'd rather suffer because I'm in the LBJ"* [Gotlib, A. et al]. Besides, the casual style - the use of many slangs and swear words of the work - can also be seen as the expression of the psychologically being severely hurt. However, the American community in the United States of America does not understand it because they have never experienced such psychological trauma. Therefore, when Paco returned to America, he became a lost species, an eccentric who was never able to integrate with the world around him.

In contrast, due to the fact that the war occurred in Vietnam, every Vietnamese person had to bear the devastating effects of the war. Therefore, although Kien is lonely, he is not the only one who has to endure psychological trauma. When the war was over, many happy families; for example, Du's family, now suddenly have no one alive, but he was the only man, or Mr. Huynh's family had three children killed in battle, etc. Many friends of Kien's age group in the same apartment building died while their silhouette is still there. Their lives still leave a shadow on the faces of future generations. Hence, with Kien: *"All that is crushed by war, the echoes are lasting, lasting longer than all the remnants of war and fights"* [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019]. There are people returning from war, but how many of them were also actually liberated from that war and how many of them were imprisoned in one way or another? Being haunted by dreams like Kien is also a kind of imprisonment: *"Back home after the war, until now, I had to endure one memory after another, day in and day out, night after night, how many years has it been?"*, *"Many days, nowhere in the middle of a crowded street, I got lost in a dream when I woke up. The mixed stench of the street was tempered by the sense of rotteness. I thought I was walking through the hill of Xao Meat full of dead people after a bloody battle at the end of December, 1972"* [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019]. Returning home with a spinal injury, a paralytic body like Sinh is another kind of imprisonment. Although he tried to suppress his heart and not to complain, but in the end, that person had to say: *"Sometimes I think it's extremely bitter. I wish there was a way to quickly die by myself. The condition of wounded men like me who lost their freedom by war is no different from that of slaves"* [Herman, S.B. et al., 2019].

However, in all wars, the most affected subjects are women. After the night of being raped on the train, Phuong left Kien. Peace was restored, when Kien returned, the woman was still too rebellious and became uncertain in her own life. Finally, Phuong left the house after many years of attachment, without saying goodbye to Kien. The psychological trauma made her unbalanced with her life, unable to connect with her loved ones and leaving seemed a necessity to her. The character Lan can be seen as another example. When Kien returned to Doi Mo to visit his adoptive mother, that woman was gone, so he only saw a slim young woman with big sad eyes, who was her youngest daughter. Lan has been living on Mo Hill alone for

many years now. Her love affair with the Tay soldier was only a month old when he had to leave to leave her a child. But then he sacrificed and the two-day-old child did not stay with her. All these years, she was still in that cottage, still trying to wait in vain. This mental tragedy would probably follow her for the rest of her life. That is also the story of many Vietnamese women on this land of bombs and mourning.

CONCLUSION

In the article, to find out the similarities differences between the two authors when looking at psychological trauma during and after the war, we compared two works written together about the Vietnam War (1954 - 1975) is *The Sorrow of War* (by Bao Ninh) and *Paco's Story* (by L.Heinemann). It can be seen that although the war has passed, the pains it causes will never end. Depicting a picture of traumatized people and tragic fates caused by war's consequences, the writers denounce war, cherish a life of happiness and peace. With a new perspective, the writers created their works partly with the urge of inspiration taken from the war trauma; that is, seeing war as a collision beyond the threshold that leaves intractable traumas in people's life.

Speaking more broadly, Bao Ninh and Heinemann are not the only writers who wrote about the psychological trauma of people after the war, but many other authors are also interested in this issue, such as Chu Lai, Nguyen Tri Huan, Trung Trung Dinh, Khuat Quang Thuy...Therefore, this topic can open up a research direction on the issue of psychological trauma in Vietnamese literature after 1975 in comparison with works written on post-war topics in the world. Thereby, we can realize the human mind in literature, in reality - a useful topic not only for literature, for psychology but also for research in humanities in general.

Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:

Nguyen, H.P. and Thi Hong Mai, T. "Psychological Trauma Presented in *The Sorrow of War* by Bao Ninh and *PACO'S Story* by L. Heinemann." *Sarcouncil Journal of Arts and Literature* 1.2 (2022): pp 9-14

REFERENCES

1. Ninh, B. "The Sorrow of War." *Literature Publishing House* (2009).
2. Caruth, C. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies, Literature and the Ethical Question* 79 (1991): 181-192.
3. Gotlib, A. "Trauma Unmakes the World of the Self. Can Stories Repair It?." <https://psyche.co/ideas/trauma-unmakes-the-world-of-the-self-can-stories-repair-it>
4. Heinemann, L. "Paco's Story." *Women's Publishing House* (2017).
5. Herman, S.B. and Sitio, I. T. "Ethnography of Communication Analysis in the Short Story of Romeo and Juliet." *International Technology and Science Publications (ITS) Education Journal* 2 (2019): 41-50.
6. Nguyen, V. L. (Editor). "Criticism of Vietnamese literature 1975 - 2005." *Publishing House of the University of Pedagogy* (2012).
7. Simaremare, Y. N., Nainggolan, W. C. and Herman, H. "Pragmatics Analysis on Conversational Implicature Used in *Mulan* (2020) Movie." *Middle European Scientific Bulletin* 15(2021): 64-74.
8. Simbolon, M. E., Purba, N. A., Herman, H. & Silalahi, D. E. "An Analysis Of Turn Taking Strategies Used By Joko Widodo In An Interview With Metro Tv." *Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Culture* 2.3 (2021): 24-35.
9. Situmorang, R. K. and Herman, H. "An Analysis of Slang Language Styles Used in *Charlie's Angels* Movie." *Journal of English Educational Study (JEES)* 4.1 (2021): 21-29.
10. Trung, T. D. "Fiction about the post-war Vietnam war in Vietnamese and American literature." *PhD thesis in Literature. University of Social Sciences & Humanities* (2018).