

## The Impact of War on Vietnamese in Robert Olen Butler Short Story "*Open Arms*"

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### Abstract:

Since the dawn of humanity violence caused by war or armed conflicts between nations or within the same nation are marked with Trauma and those individuals who face these traumatic events suffer for the rest of their lives and rarely survive its nightmarish shadow. Trauma is a Greek word means wound, however its meaning started to refer to spiritual rather than physical injuries. During the Eighteenth Century it is used to refer to emotional and psychological scars left by violent or upsetting experiences. This study refers to Trauma theory that is explained and developed by Cathy Caruth. This epistemological and ethical perspective is laid forth in her highly significant work. Depending on the theory of Trauma, the analysis will examine the impact of the war on Vietnamese immigrants to the United States and the hardships they faced, which led them to develop mental illnesses such as identity disorder, isolation, self-torture rejection, and difficulties of adaptation and loss of self-esteem. The study presents Trauma theory; its evolution, pioneers, uses, significance, and concepts. It also sheds light on the works and life of Robert Olen Butler, an American writer who served as an interpreter and an unofficial student of Vietnamese culture during the Vietnam War after briefly working in counterintelligence. It presents the short story of Open Arms. The story introduces Thap, who appears to be a devoted communist and is a North Vietnamese. Because his family was slain by the communist party, he plots with the Australians. His traumatic experience led him to committed suicide.

**Keywords:** War, Trauma, Open Arms, Thap, Butler

**Introduction:**

War is a tool for achieving goals and can be employed for both good and negative ends. Humanity has recognized some of the goals that war pursued as noble endeavors; in fact, war serves reasons that are vital to every human community. It has been employed to resolve conflicts, defend rights, and rectify wrongs—all of which are unquestionably necessary purposes. It doesn't matter how much one believes that there has never been a more inane, cruel, wasteful, or unfair approach to achieving these goals—this doesn't change the reality.

"An act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfill our will" is how Caryl Chessant (1911) described war. In other places, he stressed the continuity of violence with other political techniques, saying that "war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means" (Chessant,2005,P,4).

Q. Wright (1942; 1965) attempts to provide a synthesis of the legal, social, military, and psychological perspectives on conflict in "A Study of War." According to the resulting definition, war is a state of law and a type of conflict involving a high degree of hostility, violence, and legal equality in the relationships between organized human groups; to put it another way, war is the legal framework that equally permits two or more hostile groups to engage in armed conflict''(Wright,2005,P ,7) (Dennen,2005).

The Vietnam War began as an ideological clash rather than just a war between the United States and North Vietnam. Due to the backdrop of the Cold War at the time, which included the United States, Europe, and other countries with a capitalist system, the Soviet Union's communism as the leader of the socialist countries had a great contradiction, requiring the two camps to make great efforts to entice other nations to join theirs. For instance, the Vietnam War served as a showcase of the Cold War communications between the United States and the Soviet Union, just as the Cuban Missile Crisis did. The main reasons for US animosity toward communist nations like the Soviet Union during the Cold War were divergent ideologies and military coercion. The United States' primary strategic goal became how to restrain these communist nations. The policy of containment, which involved all the numerous containment sites, all the administrations, but most notably in Indochina, started the process of containing the countries ruled by Soviet communism. Subsequent administrations gave the policy varying statuses. As stated in a scholarly research article, the U.S. recognized that the Soviet threat could be classified more as political and psychological than as military. The primary

cause of the issue was perceived by U.S. leadership as the growing lack of confidence and will among the middle and upper classes of society as a result of the internal unrest in European countries following World War II, which created favorable conditions for the Soviet Union's expansion of its influence.(Zhao,2023).

Numerous thousands of South Vietnamese citizens left their nation once the regime fell. Eventually, a large number of people traveled to the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s in search of a better life after fleeing unbearable situations in their home countries. There were three waves of Vietnamese immigration; the third wave, which followed 1982 and comprised various kinds of Vietnamese refugees, was the most significant and intricate. Upon Saigon's collapse during the Vietnam War's conclusion in 1975, millions of Vietnamese departed their nation and migrated to the United States, seeking fresh prospects.(Abdalghfar, 2020).

The Vietnam War (1955–1975), also referred to as just the Vietnam War, is also known as the Second Indochina War, the Vietnam War, and the Vietnam War Against the United States . Prior to World War II, Vietnam was a French colony. Eventually, under the influence of several forces, Vietnam was split into "North Vietnam" and "South Vietnam" following Japan's surrender. Armed conflicts and border intrusions have been experienced by both sides since that time. Initially, the United States refrained from directly intervening in the dispute between the two nations, instead offering the South Vietnamese administration material and military backing. e. However, U.S. military aid and economic subsidies to South Vietnam increased over time as a result of the disintegration of the South Vietnamese administration and the country's progressive disadvantage in the political and militarily battles with the United States. The United States started to directly intervene in the war as it intensified, but this did not have a good effect on the conflict; instead, the war line gradually became longer, the United States made significant financial investments in South Vietnam, and the army (Zhao,2023).

The causes of the Vietnam War were a combination of geopolitical tensions, historical factors, and ideological beliefs. The conflict had a profound impact on Vietnam, the United States, and the world at large. The Vietnam War had far-reaching consequences for the United States both domestically and internationally. In the Vietnam War, almost 58,000 American soldiers lost their lives. The country as a whole, as well as the family and friends of the deceased, were all deeply affected by this loss of life .One of the most expensive wars in American history, the Vietnam War resulted in substantial

inflation and economic instability in addition to direct costs exceeding \$168 billion. The war's expense added to the nation's mounting debt and faltering economy.

The Vietnam War had a profound impact on American soldiers and veterans, both during and after the conflict. In the Vietnam War, many soldiers lost their lives or suffered injuries. Soldiers faced a range of dangers during the conflict, including mines, booby traps, and ambushes. The fighting was fierce. Amputations, burns, and shrapnel wounds were common physical traumas sustained by those who made it out alive. Many soldiers experienced extreme trauma during the Vietnam War, which had a major effect on their mental health. The experiences they had in war led to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in many soldiers. : Many veterans found it difficult to readjust to civilian life after returning from Vietnam. They had been exposed to extreme violence and trauma, and their experiences had changed them in profound ways. Some veterans struggled to find work or housing, and many felt alienated from society. (Lazuardi, 2023).

### **1.1 Theory of Trauma**

The word "trauma" comes from the Greek word "trauma," which meaning "wound." The concept was altered by Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) from its original meaning, which mentioned a bodily wound, to "harm inflicted not on the body but on the mind" . Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can induce stress, despair, anxiety, helplessness, serious mental illness, and, in some cases, suicide, may emerge from the psychological fallout from the traumatic experience. "PTSD is a severe anxiety disorder that can occur after being exposed to any psychologically traumatic incident," according to studies (Varthini and Niranjani, 2022).

Together with Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, Cathy Caruth was one of the founding figures of trauma theory. Her extremely influential work lays out this epistemological and ethical approach. Caruth contends in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) that we don't have to abandon history in favor of a textualist approach that maintains all references are implicit . On the contrary, she argues, it can give us special access to history: "By means of the concept of trauma, we can comprehend that a reconsideration of references is meant to preserve history rather than to reposition it in our comprehension, that is, to precisely allow history to emerge where instantaneous comprehension might not" (Caruth, 1996, P, 45) . According to Caruth, trauma is an overpowering experience that is difficult to integrate and

communicate, and history is intrinsically painful. In the analysis of texts bearing witness to traumatic histories, Caruth argues that combining a psychoanalytic perspective on trauma with a deconstructive vigilance regarding the indeterminacies of representation can provide us with a paradoxical mode of access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation. According to this explanation, the "undecidability" or "unreadability" of texts reflects the trauma's inaccessibility (Craps, 2013).

Trauma theory demonstrates a similar level of interest for the relationships that exist between injuries and words as well as between injuries and meaning. However, there have been a lot of variations in the theories proposed to explain these relationships. Caruth's seminal works, *Trauma and Unclaimed Experience* (1996), established a paradigm for trauma theory that was skeptical of narrative. Caruth concedes that trauma may be turned into a story that seeks to make sense of the inexplicable, but asserts that this is likely to misrepresent the "truth" of trauma and lessen its impact: The accuracy and intensity that define traumatic recollection may be lost in the process of transforming the trauma into a narrative memory that enables the story to be expressed and shared, as well as integrated into one's own and other people's understanding of the past. (Schindlofer, 2013).

According to Freud's early research, traumatic hysteria arises from a sexual attack that was suppressed in the past. In *Studies in Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer stress that the initial incident was only traumatic in its remembrance not in the event itself. Since the initial incident still causes suffering, understanding the consequences of the past and releasing oneself from its grip on symptoms necessitates the talking cure or abreaction. Crucially, the impacts and significance of the past are delayed by a latency period of deferred action, which occurs only after the traumatic occurrence. The prior event cannot be known in the remembering process until a current occurrence brings the previously suppressed event to light. Breuer and Freud write; We may reverse the dictum "cessante causa cessat effectus" (when the cause ceases the effect ceases) and conclude from these observations that the determining process (that is, the recollection of it) continues to operate for years—not indirectly, through a chain of intermediate causal links, but as a directly releasing cause—just as psychical pain that is remembered in waking consciousness still provokes a lachrymal secretion long after the event. Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.

Not only does the remembering process cause psychological suffering, but it also gives significance to an unconscious, previously suppressed event. Because of the pathological symptoms that this traumatic remembering creates, it is referred to as "pathogenic reminiscences" (Balave,2018).

Trauma works through mechanisms of the unconscious. The initial pain, obsession, and overwhelm are not really trauma until, at a very distant point in time, mechanism is unconsciously activated the pain, disturbing the psychological life, and bursting into inner crises, causing severe mental sequelae. Trauma, thereby creating dissociation, , trauma works by mechanisms of the unconscious. The initial pain, obsession, and overwhelm are not really trauma until, at a very distant point in time, mechanism is unconsciously activated the pain, disturbing the psychological life, bursting into inner crises, causing severe mental sequelae. Trauma, thereby creating dissociation, fracture in consciousness, even pushes people to the limit of endurance: loss of voice, madness, silence, sleepwalking, etc (Oanh,2021).

### **1.2 Robert Olen Butler**

Butler worked as a linguist for the army in Vietnam. A large portion of his writing relies heavily on his grasp of the Vietnamese language and his experience with the country's topography, people, and climate. The characters in Butler's stories are those whose wartime memories and the stark cultural divide between American and Vietnamese people still have an impact on their lives. His ability to portray the vocabulary, tone, and points of view of both male and female characters, as well as Americans and Vietnamese, is astounding. . He is the recipient of an award from other veterans for his exceptional achievements as a Vietnam War veteran to American society.

His work sheds light on a variety of intriguing and appealing facets of Vietnamese culture. It also demonstrates how incredibly disconcertingly different that life may be from American existence. His characters' battles with various facets of American culture show us why their postwar lives are marked by both bittersweet betrayals and fresh possibilities. The last physical and psychological injuries that both citizens and former soldiers have experienced contribute to the urgency of the first-person accounts they provide .Butler's collection, which is place in Louisiana and Vietnam, the places where many of his uprooted characters go as exiles, offers a postcolonial critique that exemplifies how Western views of the East, by their very nature, can never truly become authentic. (Wyman.2012).



### 1.3 *Open Arms That Welcome Death and Nightmares*

Butler's story, "*Open Arms*," (1992) is located in the middle of the battle. It narrates the tale of Đặng Văn Thập, a former Communist who changed sides when his wife and kids were murdered by Viet Cong fighters. He is currently employed by the Australian army as a Vietnamese interpreter. The narrator of the story, who shares his experiences throughout the conflict, is tasked with questioning Thập.

Trauma is defined as the reaction to one or more violent, unexpected, or overwhelming experiences that are not completely understood at the time they happen but recur later in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and other recurrent phenomena. One day, the Australian soldiers take him to an X-rated film. He kills an Australian soldier and commits suicide after becoming distraught. Butler is attempting to imply that he might have remembered his late wife. In the end, the narrator acknowledges that Thập's violent reaction was primarily sparked by his personal grief because the movies both make fun of his futile yearning and bring up memories of his late wife. The narrator explains, "I felt awful for Thập, his needing a woman, wanting his wife, these films he [Thap] saw gave the feel of his wife to him, being drawn by that very yearning to a vision of her body as ashes now and bits of bone" (Butler, 1992, P, 13). Things had only become worse because Thập had been directly touched by the filth of the West and felt a deep sorrow for his deceased wife. His options were limited. Thập seems to get fixated on figuring out how to end his own life; in fact, it turns into a coping mechanism for his pain. These facts demonstrate how trauma continues to shape Thap's overall existence and his reflections on catastrophic suffering. (Abdalghfar, 2020).

The narrator of "*Open Arms*" begins by saying he has no hatred inside of him and then goes on to describe the highs and lows of working "for his country long enough" to lose both his wife and her lover. The reader can see his compromise in the following sentences, as he expresses his personal freedom to despise or adore Australians or Americans. This sentence demonstrates that even if working for foreigners is an inevitable "horror," he will eventually come to like them. He will have to continue working for them despite the high likelihood of disliking them in order to support himself; this does not always include harbored grudges. A battlefield never accepts that, and he is skilled at resolving it. Furthermore, the narrator has made it clear on multiple occasions that his faith in Buddhism was once strong but faded in the dénouement. This explains why he believes that Thap's untimely death by suicide is due to "the impurity of the West," (Open

Arms,1992,P,13) which has so strongly ensnared him and left him with no choice but to lose his military rank and, most importantly, his pride. As a result, this gives the reader and the narrator a fresh perspective on how horrible things may get when a believer disobeys the laws of their religion. To put it another way, he discovers that faith overcomes material authority.

In "*Open Arms*," when the narrator speculates that Thap was half-ghost, half-human, and calls him someone "much bigger than the body he was in." Not to mention that in a covert chat, the American Townsend learns about Thap's professional past, something he himself "hope[s]...is real." These show that, even if Thap is a "fellow" Vietnamese, the idealized version of him is horrifyingly romanticized and only makes him seem "superior" since he smokes classily and hardly speaks.(Praditba).

“Thap was a true believer, and that night he felt that he had suddenly understood the democracies he was trying to believe in. He felt that the communists whom he had rightly broken with, who had killed his wife and shown him their own fatal flaw, nevertheless had been right about all the rest of us.”(Butler,1992,P,17) .

Thap was a communist, but he turned against them and joined the opposite side after the communists slaughtered his wife and kids. Nevertheless, Thap believed that communism was correct after viewing the pornographic movie, which was outlawed by communist rules. This helps to understand why it might be challenging for someone to adapt to a new environment and culture. According to Michel Foucault, the power shapes people's attitudes. For example, Thap has his own ideology since the dominant power causes trauma and psychological problems after murdering his wife, however, his thoughts gradually have changed.

Based on Cathy Caruth's theories about trauma and the discourse surrounding modern trauma criticism, we hold that trauma is, in the broadest sense, first and foremost mental distress and pain—the inner experiences that people have in response to unexpected, horrific events, where the transcendent nature of the event causes people to become unaware of the trauma from the outset. As a result, trauma is only identified during the recall process and in the sequence of memories ingrained in the human unconscious. Second, the experiences remain at the center of trauma. But the bounds of what constitutes a significant traumatic event ought to be expanded. If trauma is only understood in a limited sense, with the belief that traumatic events are tragedies that happen in human life (war, disaster), then unintentionally, certain writings about violence in daily



life will be left out of the stream of trauma literature. Trauma operates through unconscious processes. Until a very far-off moment when the original anguish, obsession, and overload unintentionally triggers the pain mechanism, disrupting psychological life, breaking into inner crises, and creating serious mental sequelae, it is not actually trauma. Trauma can cause dissociation, a rift in consciousness, and can drive people to the brink of endurance in the form of voicelessness, insanity, sleepwalking, etc) (Oanh,2021,p.108-109).

The troops who fought in the Vietnam War saw significant effects from the conflict. A lot of troops faced hostility when they got back home; some were even called war criminals and accused of killing babies. Others battled psychological and physical wounds, such as PTSD. Public perceptions of war and veteran treatment have changed as a result of the experiences of Vietnam veterans. The public's confidence in the military and the government was damaged by the Vietnam War. Cynicism and disappointment were fueled by the belief that the government had misled the population about the goals and course of the war. Many Americans continue to view the government and military with distrust and suspicion as a result of this legacy of mistrust in American politics and culture (Islam).

"I say that desire can lead to unhappiness, and so can a strong belief." (Butler,1992,P,18).

The narrator, who had served in the army and lived and married in Vietnam, is currently a resident of the United States, where he has a good job and a wonderful apartment. Occasionally, he reflects on how his past was shaped by a different guy named Thập, whose actions were dictated by his ideas and aspirations. Above all, Thập yearned to be with his spouse, and he firmly believed that Vietnam should be a communist nation—a pure nation, in his view. After his wife passed away, his intense longing for her prevented him from being happy, and his strong beliefs prevented him from assimilating into the new Vietnamese culture. To prevent the same conclusion, the narrator ensured that he had no strong views or desires in his life. Because of this, he was able to live a long and happy life without reflecting on the past. This further demonstrates the need for balance and a clear perspective on life, free from extremes, for happiness in a person (Micola,2019).

Numerous intriguing and appealing facets of Vietnamese life are revealed by Butler's work. It also demonstrates how incredibly disconcertingly different life can be from that of the United States. His characters' battles with many facets of American society show us why their postwar lives are marked by both bitter betrayals and new

prospects. The last physical and psychological injuries that both citizens and former soldiers have experienced contribute to the urgency of the first-person accounts they provide (Butler, 687).

The Viet Cong defector Thập functions as a narrated ghost and a doubly fictionalized character in "Open Arms." The anonymous narrator tells the reader his story from his point of view, which, to borrow Derrida's phrase, so deftly folds Thap's perspective that it is easy to forget that his story is set inside a story that is always already interpreted later in Louisiana, the narrator's home. As a result, a framed text—a typically realist feature of a text—contains distinctly postmodern elements. As Edward Said could point out, this rhetorical device eventually exposes as much, if not more, about the narrator than it does about Thập. The story's jealous narrator, who admires Thập's self-control, his marriage, and his devotion to Buddhism, effectively silences Thập. Thập seldom expresses his ideas clearly; instead, the narrator acts as a conduit for the reader to receive them. In actuality, the entire story illustrates how the narrator perceives Thập's inner life, which can be summed up as "the most complicated feeling [the narrator] could imagine". For instance, the narrator's infatuation with Thập's passionate, sexual bond with his wife is conveyed both verbally and visually. He asks a cruel question about her to get Thập to respond negatively, and then he examines Thập's response to a pornographic movie. Butler's collection may be haunted by a hunger for victory, but the cuckolded narrator idealizes Thập's broken love through the sorrow and staging of her portrayal of Thập (Wyman, 2012).

### Conclusion

War entails protracted, extensive fighting that causes a great deal of casualties, devastation, and disruption. People who are exposed to violence may become more aggressive and violent during and after the conflict. Post war era is marked with psychological difficulties that equal in impact all other problems that occur in different layers. In his stories, Butler introduces the spiritual and psychological scars that are hidden under the several masks to avoid releasing the monster born during the war. His narratives adhere to Caruth's trauma theory's precepts. He focuses on the experiences of Vietnamese refugees who fled their homeland and made their way to the US. In *Open Arms* the story explores the depths of Thap's character, which has been molded by the brutality of war and the ideological brainwashing he experiences. Thap is greatly impacted by the Communist ideology, which defends drastic measures in the sake of the cause. He begins to view acts of cruelty and violence as honorable and even essential as a result of this brainwashing. His convictions warp his moral compass, fostering the growth of evil in him as he commits crimes without feeling guilty. The narrative demonstrates how Thap dehumanizes his

adversaries, seeing them as impediments to be overcome rather than as unique people.

Thap's journey illustrates the intricate interplay between personal experiences, cultural norms, and ideological beliefs. His initial rejection of communism following a devastating loss reflects the profound impact of individual trauma on worldview. However, his encounter with a non-censored film challenges his assumptions, highlighting the influence of cultural exposure on ideological perception. Thap's story serves as a reminder of the complexity inherent in navigating diverse environments and the importance of remaining open-minded in the face of conflicting experiences.

To conclude this story, the war affected Thap psychologically and socially, as the trauma he experienced due to the killing of his wife and children made him leave communism, leave his country and be isolated from society, but due to the differences in values and cultures in the other country, he was in a conflict between his communist beliefs and the decadence that the West lives, so he committed suicide.

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## تأثير الحرب في الفيتناميين في قصة روبرت أولن بتلر القصيرة "الأذرع المفتوحة"

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### الملخص

منذ فجر الإنسانية والعنف الناجم عن الحروب أو النزاعات المسلحة بين الأمم أو داخل الأمة الواحدة يتسم بالصدمة النفسية ويعاني الأفراد الذين يواجهون هذه الأحداث المؤلمة بقية حياتهم ونادراً ما ينجون من ظلالها الكابوسية

الصدمة هي كلمة يونانية تعني الجرح، إلا أن معناها بدأ يشير إلى الإصابات الروحية وليس الجسدية. وخلال القرن الثامن عشر استخدمت الكلمة للإشارة إلى الندوب العاطفية والنفسية التي تتركها التجارب العنيفة أو المزعجة. تشير هذه الدراسة إلى نظرية الصدمة التي قامت بشرحها وتطويرها كاثيرين كاروث. تم وضع هذا المنظور المعرفي والأخلاقي في عملها المهم للغاية. واعتماداً على نظرية الصدمة النفسية، يتناول التحليل تأثير الحرب في المهاجرين الفيتناميين إلى الولايات المتحدة والمصاعب التي واجهوها، مما أدى إلى إصابتهم بأمراض نفسية مثل اضطراب الهوية والعزلة ورفض التعذيب الذاتي وصعوبات التكيف وفقدان احترام الذات.

تعرض الدراسة نظرية الصدمة؛ تطورها وروادها واستخداماتها وأهميتها ومفاهيمها. كما تسلط الضوء على أعمال وحيات روبرت أولن بتلر، وهو كاتب أمريكي عمل مترجماً فوراً ودارساً غير رسمي للثقافة الفيتنامية خلال حرب فيتنام بعد أن عمل لفترة وجيزة في مكافحة التجسس. ويعرض قصة قصيرة بعنوان "الأذرع المفتوحة". تقدم القصة شخصية ثابت الذي يبدو شيوعياً مخلصاً وهو فيتنامي شمالي. وبسبب مقتل أسرته على يد الحزب الشيوعي، يتأمر مع الأستراليين. قادته تجربته المؤلمة إلى الانتحار.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحرب، الصدمة، الأذرع المفتوحة، ثابت، بتلر.