

Representing Silent Trauma Through Joan Baez's Saigon Bride (1967): A Trauma-Theoretical Lyric Analysis

Devitasari¹, Irma Rahmawati²

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Business and Social Science, Universitas Dian
Nusantara

e-mail: ¹31119025@mahasiswa.undira.ac.id, ²irmarahmawati@undira.ac.id

Corresponding author: irmarahmawati@undira.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of silent trauma in Joan Baez's song lyric Saigon Bride (1967) through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. This research aims to analyze how silent trauma is constructed through narrative structure, traumatic imagery, and symbolic language, as well as to explain how the concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and the cry of the wound reveal the psychological suffering represented in the lyrics. This study applies a qualitative descriptive method using a close reading approach. The primary data consist of selected lyric excerpts from Saigon Bride, while secondary sources include books and scholarly studies related to trauma theory and literary analysis. The findings reveal that silent trauma is represented indirectly through farewell narratives, images of death and destruction, and symbolic expressions related to separation and uncertainty. Furthermore, Cathy Caruth's theory demonstrates that the speaker's trauma emerges as an unresolved experience, delayed psychological suffering, and indirect testimony expressed through repetition and rhetorical questions. This study concludes that Saigon Bride represents war trauma not through explicit emotional expressions but through silence, symbolic language, and restrained narratives that reflect the psychological consequences of war.

Keywords: *Silent Trauma, Cathy Caruth, Saigon Bride, Song Lyrics, Trauma Theory*

INTRODUCTION

War represents one of the most complex humanitarian experiences because its consequences extend beyond physical destruction and military confrontation. Armed conflicts frequently produce psychological suffering that affects individuals, families, and communities through fear, loss, uncertainty, and emotional instability. The psychological consequences of war often remain invisible because traumatic experiences are not always expressed through direct narratives. Instead, trauma may appear through silence, fragmented memories, symbolic expressions, and indirect forms of communication. Therefore, literary studies provide an important perspective for understanding how human suffering caused by conflict is represented through artistic expressions. The Vietnam War (1955–1975) became one of the most influential conflicts of the twentieth century because it generated extensive political, social, and cultural consequences. The conflict between North Vietnam and South Vietnam developed into a global Cold War confrontation after the involvement of the United States. Beyond its military dimension, the Vietnam War also produced significant psychological effects on soldiers and civilians who experienced separation, violence, and uncertainty. These experiences later became subjects of representation in various cultural forms, including literature and music.

During the 1960s, protest music developed as an important medium for expressing criticism toward war and highlighting humanitarian suffering. Folk musicians used songs not only to challenge political decisions but also to represent the emotional experiences of individuals

affected by conflict. Joan Baez became one of the prominent figures in this movement because her music consistently emphasized peace, justice, and human suffering rather than military achievements. Her songs frequently focused on personal experiences that revealed the emotional consequences of political conflicts. One of Joan Baez's anti-war songs, *Saigon Bride* (1967), presents a unique representation of the Vietnam War because it does not focus on battlefield experiences or political arguments. Instead, the song portrays the emotional condition of a soldier who prepares to leave his loved one before entering a dangerous situation. Through expressions of farewell, uncertainty, and anticipation of death, the lyric presents psychological suffering without directly describing emotional pain. This indirect representation creates a form of trauma that remains silent but visible through poetic language.

In literary studies, trauma is not always represented through explicit descriptions of suffering. Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that trauma occurs when an overwhelming experience cannot be fully understood at the moment it happens. As a consequence, traumatic experiences return through repetition, memory, silence, and symbolic expressions. Through the concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and the cry of the wound, Caruth demonstrates that trauma often appears through indirect forms because the individual cannot completely articulate the traumatic event.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between music and trauma representation. Research on song lyrics demonstrates that musical texts can function as cultural expressions that represent emotional suffering, historical memory, and psychological experiences. However, many previous studies primarily focus on collective trauma, healing processes, or trauma represented through musical performances. Limited attention has been given to the representation of silent trauma in song lyrics as independent literary texts, particularly in relation to pre-combat psychological experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing Joan Baez's *Saigon Bride* through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Specifically, this research investigates how silent trauma is constructed through narrative structure, traumatic imagery, and symbolic language and how Caruth's concepts explain the psychological suffering represented in the lyric. Through this analysis, the study contributes to trauma studies and literary analysis by demonstrating that song lyrics can function as significant texts for understanding invisible psychological experiences caused by war.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is grounded in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which conceptualizes trauma as an experience that cannot be fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence and therefore returns through memory, repetition, silence, and symbolic expression. Caruth's three key concepts—unclaimed experience, belatedness, and the cry of the wound—provide the primary analytical framework for interpreting the speaker's psychological condition in *Saigon Bride*. Unclaimed experience explains the inability to fully process traumatic reality, belatedness highlights the delayed and anticipatory nature of traumatic consciousness, and the cry of the wound describes the indirect expression of suffering through fragmented language, repetition, and symbolic forms.

To examine how these traumatic processes are constructed textually, the study also draws on literary approaches to narrative structure, imagery, and symbolic language as intrinsic elements of song lyrics. Treating the lyrics as an autonomous literary text enables the analysis to connect poetic form with psychological representation, demonstrating how emotional trauma can

be communicated through indirect and restrained linguistic strategies rather than explicit narration.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design with close reading as the principal analytical method. The primary data consist of the official written lyrics of Joan Baez's *Saigon Bride* (1967), which are analyzed solely as a literary text without examining musical elements such as melody, rhythm, instrumentation, or vocal performance. Data were collected through document analysis by repeatedly reading the lyrics and identifying textual units that represent narrative shifts, traumatic imagery, and symbolic language. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the lyrics were examined to determine how silent trauma is constructed through intrinsic literary elements. Second, the identified textual patterns were interpreted through Caruth's concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and the cry of the wound to explain the speaker's indirect and psychologically restrained expressions of trauma. The findings were then contextualized within the humanitarian atmosphere of the Vietnam War while maintaining a strictly text-centered literary analysis.

To ensure interpretive validity, every analytical claim was grounded in specific lyric excerpts and consistently aligned with Caruth's theoretical framework, allowing the study to maintain methodological transparency and theoretical coherence throughout the close-reading process. The exclusive focus on the written lyrics also allows a deeper examination of language, symbolism, and narrative construction as literary mechanisms of trauma representation, distinguishing this study from approaches that prioritize musical performance, audience reception, or cinematic context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Construction of Silent Trauma through Literary Elements

The analysis shows that silent trauma in Joan Baez's *Saigon Bride* is constructed through three main literary elements: narrative structure, traumatic imagery, and symbolic language. These elements work together to represent psychological suffering that remains unspoken. Unlike traditional war narratives that emphasize physical violence or heroic experiences, *Saigon Bride* focuses on emotional uncertainty, separation, and anticipation of loss. Through these textual strategies, the lyric presents trauma as an internal psychological condition rather than a visible physical experience.

Table 1. Representation of Silent Trauma through Literary Elements in *Saigon Bride* (1967)

No.	Lyric Excerpt	Literary Element	Representation of Silent Trauma
1.	"Farewell, my wistful Saigon bride"	Narrative Structure	The farewell expression represents emotional separation and anticipation of loss before entering war.

2.	"I'm going out to stem the tide"	Narrative Structure	The speaker's journey represents uncertainty and psychological tension caused by facing an uncontrollable situation.
3.	"Some say it's yellow, some say it's red"	Narrative Structure	Political conflict is presented as uncertainty, while the lyric emphasizes human consequences rather than ideology.
4.	"It will not matter when we're dead"	Narrative Structure	The focus on mortality reflects psychological awareness of possible death and unresolved fear.
5.	"A tide that never saw the seas"	Traumatic Imagery	The paradoxical image represents war as an uncontrollable force that disrupts ordinary human life.
6.	"How many dead men will it take"	Traumatic Imagery	The image of death reflects the emotional burden and moral uncertainty caused by war.
7.	"How many children must we kill"	Traumatic Imagery	The image of children represents innocent victims and highlights the humanitarian consequences of conflict.
8.	"Before we make the waves stand still?"	Traumatic Imagery	The impossible image of stopping waves symbolizes the desire to end violence and suffering.
9.	"Saigon bride"	Symbolic Language	The phrase symbolizes vulnerability, emotional attachment, waiting, and the personal impact of war.
10.	"Farewell"	Symbolic Language	The word represents permanent separation and psychological loss.
11.	"Tide"	Symbolic Language	The symbol represents the overwhelming movement and destructive power of war.

12.	"Men die to build their Pharaoh's tombs"	Symbolic Language	The metaphor symbolizes exploitation and human sacrifice for political ambitions.
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Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of Saigon Bride constructs silent trauma through a farewell narrative that emphasizes separation and uncertainty. Instead of beginning with descriptions of battlefield events, the lyric opens with an emotional farewell:

"Farewell, my wistful Saigon bride"
(Baez, 1967)

The opening phrase immediately introduces the emotional condition of the speaker. The word "farewell" indicates separation, while "wistful" reflects longing and sadness. The lyric does not describe a traumatic event that has already occurred; instead, it presents the psychological burden of leaving someone important behind. This structure creates a sense of anticipation toward possible loss.

The following line:

"I'm going out to stem the tide"
(Baez, 1967)

Shows the speaker's movement toward an uncertain situation. The phrase "stem the tide" suggests an attempt to confront a powerful force that exceeds individual control. The speaker's journey is not represented as an act of victory but as an uncertain responsibility filled with emotional tension.

The narrative also develops through repetition. The return of the phrase "Farewell, my wistful Saigon bride" creates a circular structure that suggests unresolved emotional suffering. The repetition does not provide closure but reinforces the continuation of uncertainty and fear. Therefore, the narrative structure represents silent trauma through emotional repetition and the inability to escape the possibility of loss.

Traumatic Imagery

The second element that constructs silent trauma is traumatic imagery. The lyric uses images of death, destruction, and human suffering to represent the psychological consequences of war. One example appears in the line:

"How many dead men will it take"
(Baez, 1967)

The image of dead bodies presents war as a condition of continuous human sacrifice. However, the speaker does not express grief directly. Instead, the trauma appears through a rhetorical question that reflects confusion and moral uncertainty. Another significant example is the following:

*"How many children must we kill
Before we make the waves stand still?"*
(Baez, 1967)

The image of children represents innocent victims of war. The reference to children intensifies the emotional impact because it highlights the destruction experienced by those who are unable to participate in political conflicts. The speaker's suffering appears indirectly through

the inability to understand why innocent lives must be sacrificed. The imagery of the “tide” also contributes to trauma representation:

“A tide that never saw the seas”

(Baez, 1967)

The phrase creates a paradoxical image because a tide is naturally associated with the sea. By describing a tide separated from its natural context, the lyric symbolizes war as an uncontrollable force that spreads beyond its original boundaries. This imagery reflects how conflict disrupts ordinary human life and creates psychological instability.

Symbolic Language

Symbolic language strengthens the representation of silent trauma by expressing psychological suffering indirectly. The central symbol appears in the title:

“Saigon bride”

The phrase does not simply refer to a person waiting in Saigon. It represents emotional attachment, vulnerability, separation, and the human consequences of war. The bride becomes a symbol of what the soldier may lose because of the conflict.

The word:

“Farewell”

Also functions symbolically. Rather than representing an ordinary goodbye, farewell represents emotional separation and the possibility of permanent loss. The repeated farewell suggests that the speaker already experiences psychological suffering before facing the battlefield. Another important symbol is:

“Tide”

The tide represents the uncontrollable movement of war. Similar to natural forces that cannot easily be stopped, war is portrayed as something overwhelming that dominates individual lives. The phrase:

“Men die to build their Pharaoh’s tombs”

Contains a metaphorical representation of exploitation. The image of Pharaoh’s tombs suggests that ordinary people become sacrifices for larger political ambitions. Through this symbolic expression, the lyric criticizes the human cost of war and reveals the speaker’s awareness of suffering caused by institutional power.

Discussion

Representation of Silent Trauma Based on Cathy Caruth’s Trauma Theory

The findings demonstrate that silent trauma in *Saigon Bride* can be explained through Cathy Caruth’s concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and the cry of the wound. These concepts reveal that trauma does not always appear through direct emotional statements but through fragmented expressions, repetition, and symbolic language.

Unclaimed Experience

According to Caruth (1996), trauma occurs when an overwhelming experience cannot be fully understood at the moment it happens. The traumatic event exceeds the individual’s ability to process and represent it completely. In *Saigon Bride*, this condition appears through the speaker’s inability to understand the meaning of war and human sacrifice.

The line:

“Some say it’s yellow, some say red”

(Baez, 1967)

Represents conflicting political interpretations of the Vietnam War. However, the speaker does not focus on ideological differences. Instead, the lyric emphasizes uncertainty regarding the human consequences of conflict. Political explanations become insufficient because they cannot justify death and suffering.

The question:

"How many children must we kill?"

(Baez, 1967)

Also reflects unclaimed experience. The speaker cannot provide an explanation for violence against innocent people. The trauma emerges through questioning because the experience remains beyond complete understanding. Therefore, silence becomes evidence of unresolved psychological conflict.

Belatedness

Caruth's concept of belatedness explains that trauma often appears through delayed recognition. Individuals may experience the psychological impact of trauma before they fully understand the event itself. In Saigon Bride, the speaker experiences emotional suffering before entering the battlefield:

"Farewell, my wistful Saigon bride"

(Baez, 1967)

The speaker has not yet experienced physical violence, but the possibility of separation and death already influences his emotional condition. This demonstrates that trauma can exist through anticipation and fear of future loss.

The line:

"It will not matter when we're dead"

(Baez, 1967)

Shows the speaker's repeated awareness of mortality. Death becomes a dominant psychological concern, indicating that the emotional impact of war has already entered the speaker's consciousness. Through this condition, the lyric represents trauma as an experience that disrupts normal perceptions of time.

The Cry of the Wound

The concept of the cry of the wound explains that trauma often communicates itself indirectly. According to Caruth (1996), traumatic experiences cannot always be expressed through complete narratives. Instead, trauma appears through repetition, silence, and symbolic language.

The repeated question:

"How many dead men will it take?"

(Baez, 1967)

Functions as an indirect expression of suffering. The speaker does not openly state sadness or fear, but the repeated questioning reveals psychological distress.

Similarly:

"Before we make the waves stand still?"

(Baez, 1967)

Symbolizes the desire to end violence. However, the rhetorical form suggests that peace remains uncertain. The speaker's inability to provide an answer reflects the persistence of an unresolved wound.

Therefore, Saigon Bride represents trauma as a silent psychological wound that communicates through uncertainty, repetition, and symbolic expression rather than direct confession.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of silent trauma in Joan Baez's *Saigon Bride* (1967) through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. By applying a qualitative descriptive method and close reading approach, this research analyzed how trauma is constructed through narrative structure, traumatic imagery, and symbolic language, as well as how the concepts of unclaimed experience, belatedness, and the cry of the wound explain the psychological suffering represented in the lyric. The findings demonstrate that silent trauma in *Saigon Bride* is constructed through indirect literary strategies rather than explicit descriptions of emotional pain. The narrative structure presents trauma through a farewell experience characterized by separation, uncertainty, and anticipation of loss. Instead of depicting battlefield violence directly, the lyric emphasizes the emotional condition of an individual who faces the possibility of death and separation. This narrative approach shows that trauma can exist through psychological anticipation before a traumatic event physically occurs. Furthermore, traumatic imagery in the lyric strengthens the representation of war-related suffering through images of death, innocent victims, and uncontrollable destruction. Expressions such as "dead men," "children," and "tide" demonstrate how war affects human life beyond political conflicts. These images reveal emotional instability, moral uncertainty, and helplessness experienced by individuals affected by war. Meanwhile, symbolic language transforms ordinary words into deeper representations of trauma. Symbols such as "Saigon bride," "farewell," and "tide" represent emotional attachment, separation, vulnerability, and the overwhelming nature of war.

Through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the study reveals that the trauma represented in *Saigon Bride* appears as an unresolved psychological experience. The concept of unclaimed experience explains the speaker's inability to fully understand and articulate the meaning of violence and human sacrifice. The concept of belatedness demonstrates that trauma emerges through anticipation of future loss and death before direct combat experience occurs. Meanwhile, the cry of the wound explains how trauma communicates indirectly through repetition, rhetorical questions, and symbolic expressions. Overall, this research confirms that song lyrics can function as significant literary texts for examining psychological experiences and historical memories. *Saigon Bride* represents war trauma not through dramatic emotional expressions but through silence, restraint, and symbolic communication. The study contributes to trauma studies by showing that invisible psychological wounds can be identified through literary analysis of language, narrative structure, and symbolism.

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