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Displacing the Dominant Fiction: Historical Trauma, Psychic Disintegration, and the Anti-Heroic Real in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*



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Abstract

This essay critically examines Tim O' Brien's *The Things They Carried* as a literary site of resistance, positioning it against dominant narratives of heroism, national, and moral clarity characteristically associated with war. Drawing on Kaja Silverman's theoretical notions of "dominant fiction" and "historical trauma" and Kali Tal's insights into trauma literature and mythologization, the paper explores how O' Brien disrupts the ideological coherence of war stories through emotionally fragmented, metafictional narratives. Key events, such as the deaths of two American military officers, Curt Lemon and Kiowa in Vietnam are analyzed to reveal how trauma, absurdity, and emotional incoherence disrupts the myth of noble national sacrifice. The paper argues that O'Brien's narrative strategy displaces the sanitized war memory and offers instead a raw, unfiltered, anti-heroic counter-memory grounded in loss, fragmented reality, and the impossibility of closure.

Keywords: Dominant Fiction, Historical Trauma, Mythologization, War Memory, Psychic Disintegration, Fragmented Reality, Tim O' Brien.

Introduction

The Vietnam War, spanning from 1955 to 1975, is considered to be more ideologically troubling and psychologically damaging than World War II and the Korean War, as it fractured the American consensus and marked a steep decline morally and ideologically. U.S. involvement in Vietnam, rooted in Cold War politics, later escalated due to flawed geopolitical strategies such as the domino theory that resulted in massive civilian casualties and extensive disillusionment. While talking about the U.S. miscalculations about Vietnam, George C. Herring notes that, from the very start, the American politicians saw Ho Chi Minh, the revolutionary leader of Vietnam, as a tool in the hands of the Soviet Union and its aspirations for world domination, which ultimately led to U.S. involvement in an all-out war in Vietnam (Herring 106). This led to the division of the world into two hostile power blocs, further disrupting the global order. In the midst of this global tug of war of politics of containment, a moral collapse was witnessed, which redefined the meaning of heroism, war, truth, and suffering for many American soldiers serving in Vietnam, making them rethink the politics of war and leading them to consciously reject the dominant fiction of war heroism, nationalism, and patriotism. In this milieu, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* breaks the conventions of a typical war story of heroism, bravery, and politicized morality by bringing forward different stories emerging not as political narratives of war but rather as a metafictional narrative giving a balanced literary response attempting to show how war is remembered and mythologized and what it actually is.

In *The Things They Carried*, set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, O'Brien, through the use of unstable events, repetition, emotional incoherence, and fragmented consciousness, dives deeper into the psychological state of the traumatized soldiers, resisting the uniform rhythms of the war-story genre, and attempts to dismantle dominant narratives of valor and glory linked to war. Drawing on Kaja Silverman's theory of historical trauma as being ideologically bound and Kali Tal's analysis

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regarding trauma literature, testimonials, and silencing, I argue that O'Brien attempts to reorient the war memory from valor, glory, and sacrifice toward collective trauma shaped by jarring yet ordinary events. I argue that, by coming up with narratives like Kiowa and Curt Lemon's death, which are careful yet emotionally direct and raw, O'Brien attempts to subvert the American nationalistic posture of "make things whole," encouraging people to look beyond the politics of understanding war and heroism and see within the fissures when the dominant fiction collapses, thus creating a counter-memory of war.

Looking back into history, Vietnam was divided by two sets of conflicting political beliefs, as North Vietnam had Communist leanings led by Ho Chi Minh, a revolutionary. While South Vietnam, anti-communist, was supported by the West. Both China and the Soviet Union were politically supporting North Vietnam, and the U.S. saw it as a huge threat (Carson 188). George C. Herring notes that, the two most significant events that marked the intervention of the U.S. were the suspension of colonial empires and the start of the Cold War (105). America felt threatened by the Viet Minh revolutionary movement led by Minh, who was a charismatic and well-organized leader and made every effort to establish his supremacy. The U.S. had this impression that unequivocal support was extended to Minh by the Soviet Union and China, and Moscow was actually behind the revolution initiated by Ho (Herring 105). However, this wasn't the case, as Ho did most of it on his own with some external support, which was not always from Beijing and Moscow, and all of these countries did not share one joint unanimous goal regarding Communism in Vietnam. However, U.S. leadership saw it in some other light and considered the Vietnam conflict as a fundamental part of its struggle against Communism (Herring 106). In such a geopolitical landscape of the world, divided into two hostile power blocs, a delicate power balance existed which further led into a sort of zero-sum game where the US viewed everything associated with Communism as a threat to its hegemonic ideals; this further impacted its judgement and at times issues of less importance became more important for no valid reason. The start of the Korean War in June 1950 seemed to confirm the assumptions of NSC-68, a top secret report written by Paul Nitze from the US State Department's Policy Planning Office. The report stated that the end of World War II will lead to a renewed Russian expansion and therefore US should begin a huge political, economic, military build-up to contain the threat of Russia and Communism (Atomic Heritage Foundation). Such reports were taken very seriously by Harry S. Truman and the NSC, which further solidified the impression that the Communists were willing to use military power to achieve their goals (Herring 107). Thus, in 1950, the Truman administration extended to East Asia a containment policy that had originally been applied in Europe. The first American commitment in Vietnam, an effort to help the French suppress the Viet Minh revolution, was part of this broader attempt to contain communist expansion in Asia (Herring 107). This Cold War paranoia and misinterpretations of the U.S. policymakers led them to see Vietnam through a lens of a distorted bipolar Cold War logic, further leading to poor decisions and numerous miscalculations about the nature and risks associated with this conflict.

This fear was further magnified by the domino theory that the fall of Vietnam would affect the entire Southeast Asian region, which will have repercussions beyond that. Later in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the notion of domino was replaced with credibility, and the US posture was that it should still stay put in Vietnam to

show and display its resolve to safeguard its vital interests all across the world (Herring 108). Sandra Scanlon notes that, when Lyndon B. Johnson took the presidency in 1963, America was quite deep in the Vietnam conflict, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) had been set up, and around sixteen thousand military advisors from the US were in South Vietnam (43). During this period, Kennedy's advisors backed a military coup, helping to overthrow the government of Ngo Dinh Diem (a South Vietnamese politician and final Prime Minister of State of Vietnam) and assassinating him. Diem had categorically rejected the idea of bringing US ground troops, as he feared that this would undermine his authority. In the wake of such political aggression and instability, Johnson was well aware of the risks in engaging in another Asian ground war, but he feared that U.S. credibility was at risk, and therefore, with the fears of weakening hegemony of the U.S., China/USSR intervention, and nuclear confrontation, Johnson's team came up with another military policy, which was crafted to keep a hold in the region by exercising calculated aggression. The key postulates of the policy were: i. force North Vietnamese (by bombing) to stop supporting Southern rebels, ii. Use U.S. personnel to defeat the insurgency in the South, and iii. Fortify the Saigon government by using soft power to win the confidence of South Vietnamese (Scanlon 44). These political postures shaped the containment policy of the US in Vietnam and completely ignored the ideological and nationalistic fractures in Communism itself. Operation Rolling Thunder, the bombing of North Vietnam, had a devastating impact. In reaction to an attack by the National Liberation Front (NFL) of South Vietnam on the US airbase at Da Nang, things got more escalated, leading to a new phase of the Vietnamese struggle to complete the revolution that started in the 1940s (Scanlon 44). Johnson also faced opposition and criticism in the U.S. for his manner of handling the war. Such political irrationality and fear led to policy paradoxes on the part of the U.S. government. The U.S. completely misidentified an anti-colonial, national movement for a sort of global communist offensive and, in a way, trapped itself into an unwinnable military and ideological fight.

In connection to the history, it could be said that the Vietnam War was not only epistemologically incoherent, but it also left the soldiers to carry heavier burdens than the gear of war itself. Many veterans returning from the war suffered social alienation, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and lack of institutional support. On the other hand, the role of American media also remains controversial as two separate public memories were created. The state-controlled media presented a filtered and sanitized image of valor and national duty, attaching glory, patriotism, and heroism with the heroes that returned to which Kaja Silverman refers to as the social formations of the dominant fiction (54). While the other side tried to bring forward the unheard stories of the Vietnam military veterans. Through an organized media and academic discourse, a sort of "historical and ideological fiction" was created, but it crumbled under the contradictory lived experiences of the veterans, as the historical trauma of the Vietnam War could not only be seen through a single linear lens of history and ideology alone, nor was it an isolated/stand-alone experience. In this context, Kaja Silverman's notion of dominant fiction is central in understanding the discourse management by the U.S. state in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Silverman argues that the dominant fiction goes beyond ideology and, in a way, also works according to Ernest Laclau's principle of "will to totality" as a difference of opinion is deemed a threat to state-making apparatuses and the state itself. Therefore, the dominant fiction

is brought into play to neutralize any differences and contractions (Silverman 54). This leads to the manufacturing of social, political, and ideological formations by the state that hinge upon different factors like sexual difference, male altruism, savior fantasy, global hegemony, etc. Silverman's historical trauma is a notion that is closely tied to dominant fiction, as it shows both the limits of dominant fiction because of its linearity due to its totality and also exposes its cosmetic and invented nature. Silverman argues that "historical trauma" is occasioned or caused by history, but its aftereffects are associated with psychoanalytical elements (55). This clearly shows how the trauma in war narratives was shaped by broader psychological, cultural, and historical elements. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* operates within these gaps and fissures of state-sponsored myth, ideology, and psychic fragmentation pointed out by Silverman.

Furthermore, Kali Tal also discusses how trauma is politicized and used as a tool of power, which could be used to look at the trauma of Vietnam veterans. Tal argues that psychic trauma oscillates between the impacts of trauma on individual people who survived it and how trauma is portrayed, redone, refashioned, and reorganized in the broader collective socio-political world (5). Tal uses the categories of mythologization, medicalization, and memory to examine various traumatic events. Tal defines mythologization as a state-led process to reduce a traumatic event to a set of uniform and homogenous narratives (6). In connection to the Vietnam War, Tal notes that in order to reintegrate military veterans back into society and hide their collective and individual war crimes, the uncomfortable histories are sanitized and recreated to fit the state-approved versions for the general public. In such cases, as the truth was manufactured by the state, therefore 'truth' itself became irrelevant.

I will be analyzing two pivotal scenes from Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* through the lens of Silverman's notions of "dominant fiction" and historical trauma, alongside Tal's concepts of mythologization and the cultural codification of traumatic experience.

In "How to Tell a True War Story" Curt Lemon, a young officer, dies by stepping on a landmine, and his body parts are blown into a tree. This happens when Lemon and Rat Kiley (his friend) were just goofing around, and everything appeared to be perfectly normal and ordinary, but then all of a sudden there is this dismembering violence. Lemon's death is quick, accidental, and absurd, but there is no heroism or glory in the manner of his death. While goofing around with Kiley, playing stupid on a regular day of inspection, Lemon is just blown into the tree and is gone (O'Brien 66-67). There is no enemy, no purpose, and no battle here. There is no space for preparedness or space for retaliation of any sort. The absurdity of Lemon's death ties to Silverman's idea of how hegemonic masculinity is ruptured (Silverman 59-60). Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon were playing catch with smoke grenades before Lemon's death and were teasing one another that the one who chickens out will be a yellow mother; however, soon after, what is left of Lemon are wet and yellow intestines (O'Brien 66-79). O'Brien juxtaposes different ideas of weakness and strength, complicating the notions of masculinity, grief, and narrative truth. The emotional tone of the scene of Lemon's death is disruptive; O'Brien moves back and forth from Rat Kiley's letter to Lemon's sister, to the scene of the death, to an explanation of a true war story, back to the death, back to the gore of death, and then back to a commentary on war. This disruptive nature of the story, punctuated further by Mitchell Sander's detached commentary, along with the repetition that "Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped

105 round,” underscores Silverman’s argument that trauma disrupts ideological coherence (Silverman 61). The repetition of unpleasure is an effort to have a psychic coherence, but’ O’Brien shows that the masculine ideals of bravery collapse under this weight of emotional incoherence. The emotional incoherence is further reflected in Rat Kiley’s response to Lemon’s death as well when he shoots the baby buffalo repeatedly and also writes a detailed letter to Lemon’s sister’ (O’Brien 64-75). Through the repetition of Lemon’s death from different points and after various other scenes, O’Brien also attempts to destabilize the reader’s search for closure or a moral, trying to show that trauma is not orderly, it’s not coherent, and it cannot be packaged into a linear model of chronology and catharsis, as its purpose is not to raise spirits, give closure, and make one proud because at times it represents banality and futility. O’Brien’s description of Curt Lemon’s “parts hanging there” on a lemon tree is an attempt to further assert that the dominant fiction ideals of male stoicism and honorable death were not representative of what actually was happening to a lot of soldiers on the ground. Lemon’s death by a childish stunt profoundly destabilizes these ideals. By foregrounding absurdity and narrative instability, O’Brien denies the reader any stable framework through which to interpret Lemon’s death as meaningful or heroic. Dave Jensen, while picking up the remains of Lemon with others, sings “Lemon Tree,” which shows the fissures of the truth of war trauma lying somewhere between tribute, mockery, horror, and futility (79). Such narratives of mourning without a closure are what Kali Tal identifies as drivers of testimonial disruption. Tal argues that the speech of survivors who witnessed a traumatic event challenges the cultural silencing and demands to rethink history, heroism, and the role of the state in creating false histories (Tal 7). The lemon tree scene therefore becomes a powerful anti-memorial fragment of history, where the grotesque reality of death and the disintegration of memory completely displaces any notions of noble sacrifice. O’Brien transforms the “lemon tree” not into a monument of heroic remembrance but into a grim symbol linked to the emotional incoherence and ideological absurdity of war.

Likewise, in the field, the scene where the platoon is searching for Kiowa’s body in a fecal swamp becomes a sort of intuitive enactment of what Tal describes as the institutional suppression of trauma and how the rhetoric of the dominant culture erases such happenings from the annals of history (Tal 6-7). Kiowa, an indigenous soldier who was very religious as well, drowns in filth and anonymity without any honor, battle, or religious ritual (O’Brien 154). The shit-field of Song Tra-Bong symbolizes moral degradation and the swamping nature of war, hinting at a literal as well as a metaphorical erasure of people and their identities. In the mud and shit of the field of Song Tra Bong, all the dominant fiction ideals of hegemony, heroism, and glory are swallowed by mud and shit, becoming a metaphor for American ideological collapse (Silverman 54-55). Furthermore, in the scene where Azar, Norman Bowker, and Mitchell Sanders are “wading” along the edge of the field closest to the river, although avoiding the shit but still being half into it, they are trying to locate Kiowa’s body. This shows the two-fold horror and collective trauma of these soldiers that undergirds the search for Kiowa’s body (157-59). The shit field, already a symbol of moral and existential ruin, becomes even more haunting and traumatic for the soldiers, not just because they are trying to retrieve the body of Kiowa, but because they are wading through the shit field of death because of the fear of their own decisions, actions, and complicity. Here the mythic structure of individual heroism

liquefies into a shared chaotic sort of moral landscape where no one can claim any authority and innocence. This transforms into a collective trauma tied to horror, vulnerability, and collective disgust for everything.

The tension between the absurd and ordinary is further made apparent through Azar's dark comic remark, "Wasted in the waste. A shit field" (158). His series of ramblings of disbelief and discomfort captures the emotional incoherence trauma produces, leading to a coping mechanism and a survival instinct that functions on cruelty. This mixture of horror and humor used by Tim O'Brien signals what Tal describes as the cultural codification of traumatic events, the impulse to transform unbearable experiences into irony or cliché to take away their emotional depth and to make them narratable. However, the codification serves a dual purpose, as sometimes traumatic events could be molded and used by political powers. But in this specific instance, even the dark humor of Azar becomes a failed act of speech incapable of restoring any meaning but, in a way, plays a necessary yet provocative gesture towards loss.

The scene of the recovery of Kiowa's body also strongly disrupts the ideals of the dominant fiction. The recovery reaches a vexing peak when Norman Bowker finds the "heel of Kiowa's boot," which illustrates the grotesque and harrowing degradation of war and its emotional toll on the survivors (O'Brien 166). The effort to extract Kiowa's body required the brute force of multiple soldiers, including Norman Bowker, Michell Sanders, and Azar, later also joined by Henry Dobbins and Rat Kiley. This symbolizes the limits of human strength and also the horror of retrieving something human from an inhuman context. Kiowa is no longer recognizable: his shoulder is gone, his arms, face, and chest have been mangled, and his entire body is caked with mud and shit (O'Brien 166-67). The image highlights both a physical and symbolic erasure. Kiowa, a Native American soldier, becomes doubly erased. His death receives no patriotic rhetoric, no public recognition; in fact, his dismembered body is moved by his filthy mates, who are too exhausted, too shocked, and too numb to associate any spiritual meaning with what they were doing in that moment. Silverman's notion of historical trauma becomes extremely crucial here, as the soldier's disassociation and their inability to process the event as a separately standing traumatic event point to the disintegration of dominant fiction. These men have become mutilated creatures, losing touch with their political/social identity and finding it hard to function under any set of beliefs (Silverman 64-89). Henry Dobbin's bleak comment, "Well, it could be worse," was questioned by Dave Jensen's raw question, "How man? Tell me how?" intersperses the scene with a strong rupturing moment. As there is no answer, because there is no coherent discursive moral framework to make sense of Kiowa's death (O'Brien 167). The cruelty and absurdity of this situation de-thrones all attempts at meaning-making. But despite this, the final affective note leaves one more confused because of its ambiguity, as the soldiers feel a guilty

relief. After cleaning Kiowa's body, the men experience a "secret joy" that they are alive and they have completely the duty of getting out the body. The rain gives them pleasure, and they are not in the shit field anymore. The emotional incoherence of feeling bad for Kiowa and simultaneously joyful to be alive reflects the psychological damage that trauma inflicts, blunting empathy and how survival is shaded by a tingle of guilt, probably the reason why Norman Bowker commits suicide. O'Brien refuses to give a narrative closure in these stories, attempting to bring forth the neglected fissures of history in the stories of war, which Tal refers to as attempts to create near-

authentic trauma testimony (Tal 7).

In sum, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* does not serve as a grandiose war narrative or a plain war documentation; rather, it is an act of sustained narrative resistance. The short stories narrated are memory projects that rupture the ideological framework of the dominant fiction. In scenes such as Curt Lemon's accidental and undignified death beneath a lemon tree and the haunting and soul-shaking recovery of Kiowa's mutilated body from the shit field, O'Brien deconstructs the structures of dignity, valor, masculine nobility, and sacrifice that by tradition normalize wartime violence. Silverman's concept of historical trauma exposes how these scenes unhinge the ideological fantasies of war as a site of "meaning-making." The emotional disagreement, recursive storytelling, and cracked group consciousness all unequivocally point to a world where trauma cannot be absorbed into and understood through a state-sanctioned myth. Moreover, Tal's critique of cultural codification helps us understand why O'Brien's refusal to emotionalize Kiowa's death is not a failure of mourning but a considered refusal of narrative resolution. The narrative's ethical force can be found in its resistance to aesthetic containment too; it preserves the shame, the silences, the gore, and all other submerged costs of war, further problematizing a closure. Instead of catharsis, O'Brien leaves us with contradiction. Instead of myth, he offers us mess but with truth.

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