***JAST*, 2020; 53:137-155**

Submitted: 01.08.2019

Accepted: 03.10.2019

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(De)construction of American Masculinity Through Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*

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Abstract

This article examines Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985) to show how the memorialization of the Vietnam War deconstructs the conventional image of the American war hero and his masculinity through the coming of age story of Samantha Hughes. While demonstrating how disruptive normative gender roles are in characters' daily lives, initiated through Samantha's passage to adulthood and her search for a father figure in the novel, Mason also shows how Vietnam destroyed the heroic soldier image in national consciousness and shook the noble cause of American exceptionalism. Through a trip to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the book, this article argues that in the search for identity, the protagonist Samantha questions both the morality of the Vietnam War and the traditional masculine attitudes of American men. Hence, the trip to the Memorial initiates a healing process as well as a confrontation of the emasculated American hero who did not feel appreciated and honored by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which became one of the most controversial historical memorializations of war in the United States.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Masculinity, Memorialization, *In Country*, Bobbie Ann Mason, Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Bobbie Ann Mason'ın *In Country* Romanında Vietnam Şehitleri Anıtı ile Amerikan Maskülinitesinin Yıkımı

Öz

Bu makale ana karakteri Samantha Hughes'un yetişkinliğe doğru attığı ilk adımlar süresince, Vietnam Savaşını anma biçiminin var olan geleneksel Amerikan savaş kahramanının maskülen imgesinde yol açtığı yıkımı Bobbie Ann Mason'ın *In Country* adlı eserinde incelemektedir. Roman, Samantha'nın yetişkinliğe geçişi ve kendine bir baba figürü arayışı ile başlayan süreçte geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin karakterlerin hayatlarında ne derece yıkıcı bir etkiye sahip olduğunu sergilerken, Mason aynı zamanda Vietnam Savaşının milli bilinçteki kahraman asker imgesini nasıl yıktığını ve Amerikan İstisnacılığının bu imgeye yüklediği soylu amacı nasıl derinden sarstığını kanıtlamaktadır. Bu makale kimlik arayışında olan ana karakter Samantha'nın hem Vietnam Savaşının etikliğini hem de Amerikan erkeğinin geleneksel maskülenliğini nasıl sorguladığını tartışmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, Amerika'da en çok tartışmaya yol açmış tarihi anıtlardan biri olan Vietnam Şehitleri Anıtı, tarafından takdir edildiğini ve onurlandırıldığını hissetmeyen, zayıflatılmış Amerikan kahramanın yüzleşme anı olmakla birlikte, romanda anıta yapılan ziyaretin nasıl bir iyileşme sürecini de beraberinde getirdiği ortaya konmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vietnam Savaşı, Maskülenlik, Anma, *In Country*, Bobbie Ann Mason, Vietnam Şehitleri Anıtı

Americans reserve a tendency for describing their historical heritage as sacralized through a national quest. This quest that is commonly known as Manifest Destiny paved the way for conquering and ruling other nations to keep the political order on their nation's behalf. In his famous essay "The Significance of the Frontier in

American History" Frederick Jackson Turner affirms this idea by arguing that "The peculiarity of American institutions is, the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people —to the changes involved in crossing a continent, *in winning a wilderness,* and in developing at each area of this progress" (1, personal emphasis). As a result, Americans created a perception of being the leader of constant change and development. This idea justified the conflicts that the United States got involved in through the promotion of bringing order and democracy. Furthermore, it was fed from the able-bodiedness of the nation's men. The archetypal image of the male warrior in the wilderness was a considerable part in the masculine image of the American male since the frontier experience had become an essential ideology for any progress of the nation. The history of the United States demonstrated an outstanding success that conditioned many Americans to be a part of victory culture with an influential autonomous male figure holding the light for them along the unknown path.

While the United States accomplished its paternalistic goals on other people and nations, American men were overwhelmed by the unattainable, mythical heroic image perpetuated through the power of media. Thus, a feeling of superiority was set by the characterization of the patriotic male when the discourse of war indicated a quest, a ritual of passage to manhood, and a chance for "confirmation of the male-self" (Leed 171). Furthermore, American culture regarded wilderness as something to be captured and also as a representation of the uncontrollable nature of man himself.

Until the Vietnam War, the United States successfully justified its involvement with each collision around the globe. Vietnam was an exception in the history of the United States since it is remembered as a "tragic mistake" and a "moral failure" (McMahon 175). As Robert L. Beisner discusses why the nation's history views the Vietnam War as a defeat in the essay "1898 and 1968: The Anti-Imperialists and the Doves," apart from the duration of the conflict, involvement with Vietnam seemed unnecessary since there were not any "concrete interests that . . . could justify such massive intervention" (213). During the cultural and political turmoil of the 1960s in the United States, society deemed American involvement in the war to be immoral due to the lack of substantiation other than American pride. Therefore, with the death of more than 57,000 soldiers, the war shook the "noble

cause" of the American hero and changed the way many people who previously sent their sons, husbands and brothers proudly to war now perceived the war.

The Vietnam soldiers' knowledge of the militaristic masculinity emanated from their fathers who went to the Second World War and the Korean War. The depiction of those soldiers seemed highly admiring and victorious. Burdened by this image, the soldiers in Vietnam were depicted as "winners" even though what they experienced there was quite different from the experiences of senior members of their families. Unlike a "romantic adventure" or a mythical challenge to his masculinity, the Vietnam soldier was faced with puzzling questions that tested his morality and humanity. Huebner affirms this particular difference between the wars as: "The heroic, selfless soldier of World War II mythology was transforming into a different sort of cultural hero, one inviting sympathy, even pity, along with respect" (175). The Vietnam soldier could not attain these positive qualities since the media broadcasted their actions on TV. Through the Vietnam War, Americans became acquainted with a new type of masculinity distorted by the harsh reality of the war and the capability of obedience to the military authority.

More largely broadcasted on TV than the Korean War, Vietnam displayed all aspects of the combat zone previously unknown to civilians. Witnessing the nation's heroic soldiers burning hutches and committing atrocities was frightful enough to spark the Anti-Vietnam protests. Moreover, considering the duration of the War, Vietnam became a place that the American soldier was tested not only by his military decision in Southeast Asia but also by his conscience. A "suspension of morality" (Huebner 216) surrendered the nation to the questioning policies and the pride of each president refusing to see that it was not possible to win the War. These factors combined added up to the anti-war sentiments around almost every region of the country. Every man in the nation was blamed for either taking action or remaining neutral in the war since "the agents of official culture […] promote[d] stability, patriotism and devotion to an idealized nation" (Keene 1097). Henceforth, the ones who decided not to be a part of the Vietnam War were criticized highly during and after the war. On the other hand, the frontier heroes of the States in Southeast Asia, who decided to stay and serve became "the scapegoats for an official policy that encouraged brutality" (Huebner 210) and therefore were blamed

for being the main actors of unnecessary violence against civilians in Vietnam and were judged as "war criminals" instead of saviors.

When the soldiers returned, rather than wearing their freshly ironed uniforms, they changed into civilian clothes in public bathrooms to avoid being lynched or called baby killers or rapists. Therefore, being a soldier in Vietnam was equated with being a failure and disgrace to the nation. The Vietnam War became a disillusionment of the heroic male of the past. Thus, remembering Vietnam also became contradictory to the nation as the majority was not ready to give up on neither its mythic heritage nor its frontier hero whose manliness had been endangered alongside with his humanity.

Moreover, since the results of the war pointed out a failure of the U.S. political and military strategies, the memorialization of the Vietnam War desired to be postponed and buried in the depths of historical consciousness until the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In this case, Judith Keene confirms the fact that both at the end of the Korean War and the War in Vietnam, Americans took part in "the process of collective forgetting" (1097) since the characteristics of both wars were inconsistent with the idealized image in their heads. Furthermore, at the end of both wars, the image of the American soldier was disfigured since most of society saw him as "a prisoner of war, who was defeated, emaciated, and possibly a brainwashed communist sympathizer" (Keene 1098). Thus, when the American male as a figure coincided with the ideas of defeat, weakness, and lack of morality, he was further regarded as feminized and condemned to be removed from American war history.

Nevertheless, what differentiated the Vietnam War from the Korean War was the power of the media, the length of the War and, the moral dilemmas that occurred with incidents such as the My Lai Massacre and the use of chemical weapons. As Judith Keene concludes in her article "Lost to Public Commemoration: American Veterans of the 'Forgotten' Korean War" the Korean War lacked "temporal coherence," "sacralized battlefields" and" consensual imagery" whereas the Vietnam War contained these particular characteristics alongside with occasions that put the U.S. authorities' humanity on stand (1098). Therefore, the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial signified the same loss but caused a more significant reaction throughout the nation as a dominant historical narrative of the United States.

Kylie Longley suggests in "Between Sorrow and Pride: The Morenci Nine, the Vietnam War, and Memory in Small-Town America" that the remembrance of Vietnam differed as "instead of the triumphalism of the WWII generation, they focused on the idea of the sacrifice and sorrow, all the while searching for some meaning in the losses associated with the Vietnam experience" (6). Thus, the Memorial attempted to confront the colossal loss and to close the generational gap between the two different images of soldiers. As Longley further notes "The memorialization of the Vietnam soldiers differed significantly from earlier manifestations after the American Revolution, Civil War, and World War II. In those cases, civic leaders quickly erected memorials to those who fought as well as those who died" (15). For this reason, Vietnam soldiers' delayed acceptance was related to the patriarchal figure of the nation since the soldiers could not meet the expectations of the heroic past.

Both Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* and its 1989 movie adaptation deal with this loss of the heroic past through the coming of age of an 18-year-old woman named Samantha Hughes and her veteran uncle Emmett Smith, who both hope for a symbolic reconciliation with the dark side of their family's past. While the novel's main point focuses on the young adult that is at the threshold of adulthood, she cannot take her first step until her family's past with Vietnam is solved. As suggested from the beginning of the novel, "Dwayne had died with secrets. Emmett was walking around with his. Anyone who survived Vietnam seemed to regard it as something personal and embarrassing" (Mason 67). While unveiling the truth about her family's past, Samantha also digs into one of the deepest wounds of the nation since the Civil War. Set in a fictional small town of Kentucky with traditionalist residents, the way in which pride and conventional gender norms affect the healing process is also emphasized.

As Emmett Smith comments on this stolidity of the townsmen towards the Vietnam Veterans in Hopewell, Bobbie Ann Mason implies the unspoken negligence of society at the time when the soldiers returned home:

> "We need to be heard, so it won't happen again. We want to let everybody know vets are not losers. You know what I'd like to see? I'd like to see a big welcome-home party downtown. Lots of places had one the year

> they put the memorial up in Washington. But nobody did a thing here."
>
> "Everything's always ten years behind here," Emmett said (Mason 59).

Furthermore, society remained unaware of the reality behind the paternalistic ideology of the War since it was small-townsmen and women who supported the ideology behind the Vietnam War. Within the first pages of the book, Samantha narrates that only the superficial is important. For instance, Emmett and his friends are criticized for causing a disturbance with their inconvenient appearance as hippies, but not for displaying a Vietcong flag from the courthouse tower. "The funny part, Emmett always said, was that nobody had even recognized that it was a Vietcong flag" (Mason 24). Interpreted as the authenticity barrier between the veterans and the communities in Hopewell, this incident shows how Hopewell conceives the War differently.

Moreover, while the novel centers on Samantha's search for her identity and struggle of choice for the future, the author hints that Samantha's coming of age story and the Vietnam War are connected. Starting with the unknown origin of her name, Samantha goes through an identity crisis that leads her to the family's past, especially her father's: "Sam was confused. If she couldn't know a simple fact like the source of her name, what could she know for sure?" (Mason 53). Consequently, she reopens the old wounds of the nation while she tries to find out who she is. Her father's and Emmett's memories in Vietnam offer her guidance about her rather unique feminine identity. As she is "too convinced of her own alienating difference from the world of conventional Southern womanhood," Samantha experiences a breakthrough when she encounters men who felt shame and humiliation after the War (Hinrichsen 236). Moreover, through questioning the events surrendering her, she gains insight into the reality of the society and her heritage.

In the meantime, Samantha is resentful when she feels excluded by her veteran uncle Emmett and his friends. Within reach of truth, the pain and guilt of the Vietnam veterans pave the way for Samantha to attain closure. Following the remains of the War, she digs deeper to resolve her past. She comes to an understanding of this connection when it is said, "She was feeling the delayed stress of the Vietnam

War. It was her inheritance." (Mason 89). Throughout her process of identity-making, Samantha begins to understand why people around her try to cover up the past. Starting with searching for her name, she ends up with a confrontation when she, Emmett, and Mamaw arrive at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. On the one hand, the events that Samantha experiences represent an initiated process of memorization of the past to a confrontation. On the other hand, throughout this process, the reader can acknowledge the destructiveness of the Vietnam War, both on the individual and national level.

It should be noted both the novel and the movie put the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a place that dissolves the problematic issues of these characters' lives and the Memorial functions differently for each character. Whereas it is a catalyst for Emmett to confront his guilt and emotions, it helps Samantha take a brave step into adulthood. It also helps Mamaw to cope with the loss of her son. The scene before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial accomplishes that historical memory has accepted the "fractured hero" (Kilshaw 198) of Vietnam. Nevertheless, Samantha's engagement with the reality of the Vietnam War through her father's diaries, her uncle Emmett, and other veterans help her to understand the traumatized group of men after Vietnam and the scene at the Memorial initiates a healing process for the whole nation.

Due to these facts, at first, this paper will be focusing on the historical consciousness regarding the War and the war hero himself to address the deconstruction of the normative gender roles in the novel as the initial action of Samantha's passage to adulthood. The second and the third parts of the article argue that both the memorialization of the Vietnam War through individual stories, diaries, and the Memorial help Samantha to carve out a place for her identity.

How the Images Differ: Emasculating Effect of the Vietnam War

War as a discourse has been coded as masculine and regarded as a gendered activity. Making the war a man's playground and offering him to show how independent, risk-taking, aggressive, and "heterosexual" he is while proudly serving his country, pushed young boys of the 60s to accept the offer from the military. In her book *Impotent Warriors: Perspectives on Gulf War Syndrome, Vulnerability and Masculinity*, Susie Kilshaw argues "as the military is central to the

creation of dominant masculinities, the men who join the forces can be seen as striving to achieve an ideal form of masculinity that emphasizes strength, mastery, violence, protection, and rationality" (193). Most of the Vietnam soldiers respected their fathers', who were often WWII veterans, authority, and word. However, while their fathers had fought in a glorious war, they fought in an unpopular one that challenged them with an unattainable masculinity. As another veteran, Jim defines how the soldiers in Vietnam had a different experience than their elders: "Take my daddy. He thinks I should have been just like him fighting in the Pacific in the second big one. But he was out on a ship, and he could see the Japanese coming. He knew who the enemy was. He knew what he was fighting for. You can't tell him Vietnam was any different. He's hardheaded" (Mason 124).

Hereafter, Emmett is also a victim of the same thoughts of his father and his pride. Encouraged by the mission of protecting national and familial values to recuperate after the loss of his brother-in-law Dwayne, he also chooses to go to war for the sake of his widowed sister and orphaned niece. Growing up in a highly conservative region, Emmett's father symbolizes the traditional warfare and masculine ideology blended with patriotism. Even though it does not go as planned and the Army fails to "make a man out of him" (Mason 149), Emmett's father still defends the mainstream American heroic image by stating "It's not too late to pull himself up and be proud" (Mason 149). Thus, Emmett's father symbolizes the majority of people who kept on believing the politicians' words on the war and supported the idea no matter how severe the consequences would be.

Moreover, the book localizes shame and humiliation after Vietnam since the Southern region had "a larger national obsession with . . . white victimization, and American 'innocence'" (Hinrichsen 234). Thus, when Southern boys went to Vietnam, there was a stronger resistance against the immorality of the war as Emmett's psychological trauma is ignored in the neighborhood. Besides, the Southerners tended to be in denial and claimed the innocence of their boys. When Samantha reads the diary of his father, Dwayne, she realizes the inconsistencies between the two images of one man: "Mamaw and Pap must not have even read the diary. If they had read it, they would have realized that he smoked and drank and murdered. Maybe they read it but didn't want to remember their son that way. So, they forgot. Or they made up a more pleasant story" (Mason 205).

In Mason's work, the image of the proud soldier dissolves through Samantha's quest for learning about the past. As a part of a culture that promotes exceptionalism, in the first pages of the novel, Samantha carries the same high expectations as her community about the Vietnam War soldiers. However, throughout her search, as June Dwyer suggests in "New Roles, New History and New Patriotism: Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*" without realizing it, Samantha derives the role of "the historian, reading letters and diaries and conducting what amount to be informal interviews of Emmett and his war buddies. What Sam does not understand is that she has armed herself with old historical expectations. She is looking for heroes and villains, strong leaders, clear causes" (72). Thus, she feels disappointed until she becomes a part of the same history and internalizes the same guilt when she visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and touches the granite wall. While Samantha tries to find the answer to her questions about her father, she witnesses different kinds of memorialization of the past and the attempts to preserve the traditional heroic image. However, starting with glimpses of Emmett's daily life, it is understood that Sam is introduced to a new image of manhood, since publicly Emmett is not able to fulfill his passage to manhood. This reflects the fact that he feels overwhelmed with the burden of war memories and has transformed into a "soft" or "feminized" man.

Since the first pages of the novel, Emmett is shunned from the society, wearing a skirt while cooking for Sam and her boyfriend Lonnie is a way to draw the attention away from his traumatized identity. "He was wearing a long, thin Indian-print skirt with elephants and peacocks on it. Now Lonnie burst out laughing" (Mason 26). As the scene continues, the author portrays Emmett as a concerned mother who was "tall and broad, like a middle-aged woman who had had several children" (Mason 32). Moreover, rather than representing an authoritative figure, Emmett stays timid towards the sarcastic comments of Lonnie.

Emmett's reaction towards the weather on the same night is another occasion that devalues his masculinity in front of a younger man who is supposed to show him respect according to cultural norms. When he feels terrorized by the loud noises and lightning, his body language is reminiscent of a horrified soldier in the swamps of Southeast Asia. Bringing back the war memories in the jungles of Vietnam, Emmett is haunted by the images and becomes vulnerable

rather than being stoic against the occasion. Alongside the moments of PTSD, Emmett does not fit into a paternal figure that can typically have a word on Samantha's life. Even though the neighborhood is known as conservative, Emmett is incapable of stopping Lonnie from taking advantage of Samantha, both emotionally and sexually. Thus, this hesitation in Emmett's behavior rouses Samantha to learn more about her father's identity in search of an authority figure.

While trying to shape her identity Samantha associates her alienation with the Vietnam veterans'. Since Samantha undertakes the responsible role against Emmett's stolidity, she tries to make sense of his non-gender specific behavior. As Lisa Hinrichsen affirms this idea Samantha "grows closer to Emmett's group of veteran friends she begins to feel allured and intrigued by the Vietnam experience, and begins identifying with the veterans and against mainstream American values" (243). Throughout this process, her masculine image advocates her association with the Vietnam experience as an outcast of the same society.

Moreover, after returning from the War, Emmett is full of normative gender expectations like that of being a breadwinner. However, being shunned from society because of the moral ambiguity of the War he has fought, he confines himself to the family home. Misjudgments against Emmett in town such as "Emmett was the leading dope dealer in town. Emmett slept with his niece… He had killed babies in Vietnam" (Mason 31) reflect the secretiveness in society about the War. As Samantha pressures him and other veterans to find out more about her father and Vietnam, she clarifies why her uncle challenges the traditional male identity by not being part of "…an employed-outside-of-the-home masculine man" (Boyle 1236-1237), and therefore her rejection of the idea of a man like her uncle changes progressively.

Thus, while Samantha questions traditional gender roles indicated by her boyfriend Lonnie and her friend Dawn, she criticizes the roles enforced by men like her uncle. Emmett is depicted as a small child to be taken care of because of his nonchalant attitude towards social expectations. Samantha, although she is younger, offers him what he cannot provide for her by being protective of him and changing her career choices by getting a job at a local store. This change of roles between the two family members also signifies the transformation in

the personality of the Vietnam soldiers after they returned home. Until the end of the book, Samantha refuses to acknowledge the actual reason behind Emmett's situation. She does not recognize the connection between his physical ailments with his mental trauma that affects him in his daily life. Thus, until her attempt to experience Vietnam, Samantha continues to take him to medical doctors. She blames the food he eats while he cringes because of the storm, and she disregards his guilt over his lost comrades in Vietnam.

Henceforth, in the beginning, Samantha represents the New South that tries to preserve the dignity of Americanism. Until she internalizes the pain and the guilt of the Vietnam soldiers, she does differentiate herself from "a homogenizing mass media that fill their daily life with a steady stream of middlebrow sitcoms, brand names, and pop songs" (Hinrichsen 235). For this reason, in their daily lives, they cannot engage with the historical depth of the culture, especially when they hear songs or the sitcoms about past events:

> "Did you know the title song's about a vet?"
>
> "Born in the U.S.A'?"
>
> "Yeah. In the song, his brother gets killed over there, and then the guy gets in a lot of trouble when he gets back home. He can't get a job, and he ends up in jail. It's a great song" (Mason 42).

Through this conversation, neither Samantha nor Dawn can acknowledge the cruciality of the Vietnam war and its effects on people. Therefore, as they stay in the conventional norms and necessities of society, they are not able to confront the past. Moreover, Samantha has the same feeling that she cannot comprehend until the trip to the Memorial. When they watch M*A*S*H, the show that takes place during the Korean War, she does not associate what happens in the series with what Emmett has experienced:

> He sometimes looked as though he had been crying. Sam remembered the time last year when they, along with most of the country, had watched the final episode of M*A*S*H. . . Emmett was choked up the whole last half hour, during the farewells among the characters, when the war was over in Korea. Even Irene sobbed, but Sam wouldn't let herself cry (Mason 107).

As acknowledged from the scene, whereas Emmett goes through a cathartic moment for his memories, Samantha is not able to cry since she does not associate herself with that old part of the culture. Moreover, Samantha is also in denial of the perception of her father's identity. Convinced with the prowess of her father told by her grandparents, saying he was mama's boy, Samantha has had a challenging time about the fact that he drank, smoked, and murdered just like most of the soldiers. Thus, until her attempt to experience Vietnam at Cawood's Pond, the swamp area in their town, her relationship with her father and her uncle stays unresolved, just like she focuses solely on the physical wounds of Emmett.

Sam's yearn for the truth in the book reveals the impact of Agent Orange, a herbicide and defoliant chemical used within the warfare as a tactical strategy by the U.S. government. Moreover, because of the same amount of exposure by the U.S. soldiers themselves, the same illnesses appeared in American soldiers. Here Mason also notes "how the true 'real' of the war was repressed from public consciousness" (Hinrichsen 235) when the apparent trauma of the Vietnam veterans becomes easier to ignore as the dignity of the nation must be protected. When Lonnie tells Samantha that "Agent Orange can affect you that way. It can settle there and practically turn you into a woman" (Mason,186) this shows how any unknown issue about Vietnam is open for speculation. For this reason, when Emmett is unable to interact with his ex-girlfriend Anita, people comment on the issue as if Emmett cannot fulfill the social expectations of being a man.

As the book continues, the reader also acknowledges that Emmett only survives from death by hiding under his dead comrades. Since he has defined the traumatic moments as follows, "For hours, then, until the next day, I was all by myself, except for dead bodies. The smell of warm blood in the jungle heat, like soup coming to a boil" (Mason 223), revealing this truth acts as a climax to the story and becomes an initial action in the lives of the two main characters in the novel. After Emmett tells Samantha, "You can't do what we did and then be happy about it. And nobody lets you forget it" (Mason 222), she acknowledges the truth about Vietnam but also the young boys who went to Vietnam with expectations of realizing manhood. As Emmett starts sobbing, the image contradicts the conventional norms of masculinity. The damage of the war made a significant impact on American men who became "dysfunctional supermen" of American manhood (Kilshaw 193).

To conclude, Samantha associates herself with the same alienation and rootlessness of the Vietnam veterans when she struggles to find out about the "real" past. Within this process, she "looks for heroes and villains, and easy narrative with clear causality" (Hinrichsen 240) as she watches a fictional TV show about war or when she listens to Bruce Springsteen or the Beatles. Since her expectations lead her to research, Samantha comes to an understanding that the Vietnam War disvalued the image of the American hero. As can be seen with both Emmett and her father Dwayne, she realizes the destructive force of Vietnam on manhood.

Female Masculinity and De-Constructing Gender

Samantha's detachment from the past limits her engagement with her decisions about the future. Since she was born into this banality of American popular culture and gender norms, when she attempts to claim her right to be part of history, she goes beyond traditional Southern femininity. Throughout the novel, she conflicts with traditional ideas as she asks for more explanation. In the middle of a decision-making age, she includes Vietnam in her quest to construct her own identity as a young adult.

When she makes the connection between her identity and the memorialization of Vietnam, she reflects her resilience both against being stuck within traditional gender roles and being outcasted from history. Moreover, when she relates the two ideas, she despises the actions of women around her. She disassociates herself from her peers and other women around her. When her friend Dawn gets pregnant through an extramarital relationship, Samantha immediately compares her situation with the war due to her growing obsession. "Dawn was going to have a baby like that, and she'd have to take it everywhere with her. It was depressing. It was as though Dawn had been captured by body snatchers" (Mason 155). Hence, Samantha not only disapproves of Dawn, but she also differentiates herself as more masculine than any other female figure in the novel.

Samantha Hughes is determined to reverse assigned gender roles and gain control of her life. Throughout the novel, Mason constructs a realization process for her about gender roles and her growth as an adult alongside the traumatic experiences of Vietnam veterans. Gradually she disagrees with the idea that "Boys got cars for graduation, but girls usually had to buy their own cars because they were expected to get

married-to guys with cars" (Mason 58), and she acts out to change her status in life by choosing a new path. Thus, as Boyle suggests, Samantha stays in "a state between masculine and feminine" (Boyle 1219-1220). This state is defined as female masculinity.

Despite being considered as a pathological state by society, Judith Halberstam defines this act of tomboyism as an extended childhood period of female masculinity, which appears "the crisis of coming of age a girl in a male-dominated society" (Halberstam 6). Moreover, when Samantha is exposed to the traumatic war stories and contradictions, this leads her to claim her right to be part of the frontier experience. As June Dwyer confirms in her article, "due to her alienation from womanhood, she claims that Samantha belongs to "both of the wrong generation and the wrong sex" (72). She carries neither any sense of belonging to femininity nor can be part of the Vietnam experience until she eludes from the mainstream historical consciousness.

Frustrated by being underestimated, Samantha goes to Cawood's Pond to ease her "battle envy" (Dwyer 72). On that account, Samantha's trip to the swamp area in town initiates her stepping into the part of history. "Some vets blamed what they did on the horror of the jungle. What did the jungle do to them? Humping the boonies. Here I am, she thought. In country" (Mason 210). This trip to the town's swamp area allows her to experience the war, whereas she "develops an integrated and healthfully androgynous ego" (Graybill 246). On the other hand, within the same scene, Emmett can finally express himself in tears to Samantha, who could not deal with the horrible, unspeakable in-country memories, which are part of a significant failure of manhood in America in a very cathartic moment for both.

The scene also signifies that Samantha's quest involves a healing process and reconciliation with the emasculated men and the immoral war their country was involved in. As the second part of the novel is completed, the quester identity heads from the "wounded king" of Vietnam (Booth 102) to a young woman who is on the edge of adulthood, reconcile with her nation's past and her masculine self. To conclude, when the coming of age story of Samantha Hughes combines with the story of emasculated men of the Vietnam War, *In Country* becomes both "a narrative of overcoming" and "a narrative of becoming" (Boyle 1644).

Dissolution of the Historical Consciousness:

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial

The last part of the book involves the settlement of Samantha Hughes and her uncle Emmett Smith about Vietnam. In this sense, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial both secures a sense of closure and signifies the last step of knowing the "real" past. Moreover, it finalizes the "years of division and protests" and a country of people "wanting to close the book on this sad chapter in its history" (Longley 6). Furthermore, Samantha's desire to uncover the truth about the past also ends when they decide to take a step to the future. When Samantha takes the trip to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, although her "struggle to find the right way to picture it, and what she sees on the television screen informs her historical expectations" (Hinrichsen 240) does not match what she sees, she confronts it. When she first sees the Memorial, her reaction reveals the distinction between the two sides of American history, in which one despises the other:

> The Washington Monument is reflected at the centerline. If she moves slightly to the left, she sees the monument and if she moves the other way she sees a reflection of the flag opposite the memorial. Both the monument and the flag seem like arrogant gestures, like the country giving the finger to the dead boys, flung in this hole in the ground (Mason 240).

Pride and nobility were two attributes given to the Vietnam soldiers very late as people refused to acknowledge they are part of "a nation bound by war could also be divided by it" (Allen 102). Disdained due to lack of clarity in their cause to fight, the Memorial's lack of connection with any war memorialization or monumentality ignited the Vietnam veterans' alienation from war history. Unlike any sanctification of the hero image, society saw the Memorial as a "castrated wound" (Sturken 123). Accordingly, society was not receptive to Maya Lin's design since it did not reflect the heroic past. "The Three Soldiers" by the sculptor Frederick Hart in 1984 added a male gaze to the war memorial. Hart's addition of soldiers is an attempt to Americanize the memory and purify the Memorial. To summarize, Hart's extension was an attempt to "fix" the Memorial according to the self-reliant nature of the States.

As the images of the Vietnam War and the righteous soldier of the States contradicted with each other, the Memorial's shape also

became discordant with the Washington Monument next to it. The obelisk of the Washington Monument as a "tribute to a single man of action, the founder of the American nation associated with the heroics of the American Revolution" (Volpp 176) symbolized a glorification of American heritage, courage, and heroism. Its verticalness symbolizes the American continuity and expansionism as well as a masculine power as a phallic monument rising upwards. Hence, when Samantha asks Tom about what he thinks of the Monument, he calls it "a big white prick" (Mason 80) as if it symbolizes the authority behind the Vietnam War.

In the novel, the Memorial becomes an embodiment of the wound left by the Vietnam war experience. It becomes "ultimate expression of the modern closed frontier" (Krasteva 83), which dignifies the purpose of the American male outside his country. Instead, it enabled a chance for "healing of a generation of warriors scarred by their experiences" (Longley 20) like Emmett Smith. Moreover, it also became a spot where a woman like Samantha Hughes can associate herself with the nation's trauma. By putting her at the center of the story, Mason changes the "monomyth of the heroic questing male on the frontier" (Krasteva 83) to a woman who includes herself in the historical memory. Hence, when she confronts the Memorial, she claims her historical heritage. For instance, when she witnesses a group of school kids and one of them reluctantly asks the meaning of the names, Samantha feels fierce and anger towards those who are indifferent to their national history. Moreover, she reconciles with the fact that the feelings she shares with others can appear in many forms: "She is just beginning to understand. And she will never really know what happened to all these men in the war. Some people walk by, talking as though they are on a Sunday picnic, but most are reverent, and some of them are crying" (Mason 240). On the other hand, Mason leaves the ending for Emmett more ambiguous than she does for Samantha. Mason gives the hint of reaching peace when she says, "his face bursts into a smile like flames" (Mason 245). The stoic image of the American male transformed into a more sensitive figure who is both the perpetrator and the victim on this occasion. To conclude, the marginalization of the Vietnam veterans as seen in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* helps a young girl to create her identity. Even though the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has a deconstructive role for the idea of the dutiful, patriotic male, through Samantha's coming of age story, it also brings a new pride for the Vietnam soldiers for their country.

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