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Research Article

The "Drama of Gender Difference," or the Question of Masculinity and Patriarchy in the Vietnam War Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Many changes brought about by the Vietnam war are reflected in the literature of the period, in which both Vietnam veterans and non-veterans alike became formative creators. Included among the Vietnam war writers are poets, playwrights, and fiction writers such as David Rabe, Oliver Stone, Gustav Hasford, Philip Caputo, Winston Groom, Robert Olen Butler and many others. Tim O'Brien and Bobbie Ann Mason also take their place in the gallery of Vietnam war writers, being included among the authors who relish life's enigmas and uncertainties in their fiction. They incorporate elements of their own life (Bobbie Ann Mason) and war experience (Tim O'Brien) into their fiction, blurring the line between reality and fantasy, fiction and truth. The accuracy of characters or events and places is not significant in their writings, as they are more interested in the emotions and feelings of their men and women rather than in mere facts. Understanding oneself as a writer is a hard journey; it is a quest that authors struggle to complete and may never fulfill. War fiction plays its part in making a significant contribution to the understanding of the Vietnam War as it enlarges the psychology of homosocial relations and deconstructs the conventional stereotypes of masculinity: from a wounded veteran to a John Wayne type hero. Men in many novels are sympathetic characters betrayed by political and cultural myths. Women are often excluded from the male war arena as the 'Other', yet they face a number of challenges, and their roles are intrinsic to the male experience. In this paper two works of fiction will be discussed which deal with the exclusion of women, rejection of femininity and restitution of masculinity. These works are Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country.*

Keywords: Masculinity, male bonding, Vietnam war, manhood, gender dynamic

"To fight has always been the man's habit, not the women."
Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

Introduction

The Vietnam War is often seen as a "magnifying glass" (Carton, 1991) which enlarges a significant subject, namely the concept of masculinity and manhood in postwar fiction and film. A number of writers treat war as if it is designed to serve patriarchy and its values, which often excludes and marginalizes women. Men have always been preoccupied with war as a way of manifestation of their power in society. Women, perceived as the inferior 'Other,' as feminists would argue, are alienated from war and its experiences. Jean Elshtain notes that "we in the West are the heirs of a tradition that assumes the affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories" (1987, p. 4). However, the male selfhood and prevailing patterns of masculine behavior are strongly associated with the feminine, such as the expression of emotion or the provision of nurture and care for others. Despite the fact that war is a male arena, it includes and touches upon the lives of women. Women share guilt, grief, and the haunting past of their loved ones – brothers, fathers and husbands. Perhaps women at times cannot fully comprehend war, yet they do fight their own battles as depicted in O'Brien's and Mason's fiction.

Since the time of Helen of Troy, "women's roles in war are diverse – pretext, entertainment, reward, nurse, spy," states Nancy Huston (1982, p. 275). If men are gone to the battlefield, women left home are empowered to "sustain culture" as they become providers, parents, and citizens, explains Maureen Ryan (1994, p. 42). Women have rebelled against their traditional roles, striving for more active social roles, therefore, the issue of women's status at war becomes complex and worthy of attention. This paper explores the gender dichotomy, which includes such issues as the rejection of the feminine and the restitution of the masculine, the trauma and revival of manhood, homosocial bonding, and the female dynamic in the masculinity recuperation in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country.*

Like other American writers, Tim O'Brien portrays 'Vietnam' in terms of the political and military intervention of America into Asia and as a psychologically traumatic experience having an effect on people's psyche. As is the case for Bobbie Ann Mason, for Tim O'Brien too Vietnam is an essential or "life-giving metaphor that is inescapable"

(Bourne, p. 76) as the Vietnam war becomes an ever-present aspect of his fiction, "a starting point for self-described quest for 'everness' and 'alwaysness' to his writing" (Herzog, p. 24). Novels are a fictional representation of wartime experiences which provide vivid perspectives on life and death, attempting to find a meaning in life and show the way towards it through human experience. The issues of courage and choice, mortality and conscience, self-search and understanding are among the topical themes in these novels. Tim O'Brien, Bobbie Ann Mason, and many other writers grasp and strive for transcendent moral truths using experiences of Vietnam, World War II, or any other war in their fiction. Both writers explore not only the moral ambiguities of the war but also the moral ambiguity of our life, "our self-deceptions and compromises," attempting to "reveal the essential nature of our humanity" (Lopez, p. 5).

Discussion

One of the most established veteran writers of the period, Tim O'Brien, sets out to tell 'true' war stories in his famous *The Things They Carried*, yet, according to Laurie Smith, "stops short of fully interrogating their ideological underpinnings either in terms of the binary construction of gender that permeates representations of war in our culture, or in terms of the Vietnam War itself as a political event" (1994, p. 17). The narrative presents men as wounded and traumatized survivors, while women are excluded and remain silent outsiders. Kali Tal identifies writing by veterans as a "literature of trauma" (1990, p. 218), which widens the gap between the readers and the writer in their understanding of the war experience. Tim O'Brien depicts war as inaccessible and incomprehensive to non-veterans. All readers are "subjugated by shifty narrator, however, the female reader is rendered marginal and mute, faced with the choice of either staying outside the story or reading against her from a masculine point of view" (Smith, 1994, p. 19). Smith argues that male characters are "granted many moments of mutual understanding, whereas women won't, don't' or can't understand war stories" (1994, p. 19).

The gender dichotomy is very traditional in the text where femininity is used to reinforce masculinity as well as to "preserve the writing of war stories as masculine privilege" (Smith, 1994, p. 19). As Eve Sedgwick argues, a woman figure is just a medium that strengthens male bonding, and adds that "in the presence of a woman who can't be seen as pitiable or contemptible, men are able to exchange power and to confirm each other's value even in the context of the remaining inequalities in their power" (1985, p. 160). She suggests that a contemptible woman "leaves men bonded together,"

reinforcing their power (160). The narrative investigates the emotions of male characters, while women are mere projections of a narrator "trying to resolve the trauma of war" (Smith, 1994, p. 19). In the context of a strong masculine subject, the presence of women disrupts and threatens masculine order as only men can fight wars and then write about them. The core of the narrative is comprised of a number of stories, four of which, in particular, represent the gender dichotomy: "The Things They Carried," "How to Tell a True War Story," "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," and "The Lives of the Dead". These stories make up a cluster of gender oppositions, while other stories play with the notion of how female presence redefines male bonding and even subverts male power.

In the rest of the narrative O'Brien invents a ten-year-old daughter, Kathleen, who reshapes his past and memories of the war. She belongs to a younger generation that is excluded from the war era, yet she is the force that makes her father forget the past and painful memories associated with that past. As Smith argues, she "reinforces the familiar criterion of being there and the more implicit criterion of masculinity as a qualification for understanding Vietnam" (p. 21). She is the muse who inspires him to write war stories. As a child she is curious to know if her father killed other people, and says, "You keep writing these war stories, so I guess you must've killed somebody." He hesitates and responds with a "No," yet at the same time he tries to "pretend she is a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. That is why I keep writing war stories" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 147). The narrator wants to tell Kathleen the truth, yet he is not sure whether it is the right thing to do. Truth once again becomes a symbol of fluidity and evasiveness, as the narrator manipulates it to the degree of what is right for his child. Later in the story *Field Trip* they travel back in time to a place in Vietnam where he had lost his best friend Kiowa years ago. To Kathleen war continues to be a puzzle, something as "remote as cavemen and dinosaurs" (p. 208). After being in a field, Kathleen wants to tell her mother about this trip, however, the narrator does not want his wife, who is only mentioned once and never shown to be a part of his past, to know about it: "'all that gunk on your skin, you look like… .What'll I tell Mommy.'… 'You're right,'" I said, "'Don't tell her'" (p. 213).

In the story *Speaking of Courage*, there is another female, Sally Gustafson, a girlfriend of Norman Bowker and a product of male imagination. Her life in a small town is so removed from Norman's traumatic experiences of the war that she cannot possibly understand him. Like the rest of the town, she is not involved in the war. She "did not

know shit about shit and did not care to know" (p. 163). In his imaginary dialogues with her Norman had "nothing he could say to her" unlike his father, another man who had "his own war" and could relate to Norman. Nothing is ever told about Sally's 'trauma,' her life without Norman and the long period of time waiting for him. Women have no voice to express themselves and reach for an emotional outlet.

Another vivid example of a woman without language is the Vietnamese girl from *Style*. The soldiers come to a village where a young girl dances a ritual dance as her family is dead in the house: "an infant and an old woman and a woman whose age was hard to tell. …There were dead pigs, too" (p. 154). Some men, like Azar, try to mock her movements failing to understand the cultural and spiritual meaning of her dance. She remains the mysterious, incomprehensible 'Other,' whom war deprived of voice, heritage and selfhood. The soldiers can neither grasp her nor her dance, and the meaning of her feminine culture is lost.

Significantly, the enemy as well as death are feminized in the narrative *The Man I Killed*. The narrator sees the body of a young boy trying to imagine his life and he comments, "He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people" (p. 144). His physical description is puzzling: "his eyebrows were thin and arched like the woman's and at school boys sometimes teased him about how pretty he was, the arched eyebrows and long shaped fingers, and on the playground they mimicked a woman's walk and made fun of his smooth skin and his love for mathematics" (pp. 139-42). The boy is feminine in his looks, reinforcing his unsuitability for the war. The narrator has to toughen up and get used to the horrors of war so that his masculine identity can take over the silent feminine one.

Women are represented as dangerous and threatening in the longer stories that constitute *The Things They Carried*. These stories all contain women characters who do not understand the war experience, and who are therefore rejected, or those who grasp it too well and threaten male hegemony. As the text unfolds, the themes of memory and war, past and present, truth and storytelling, female and male, alternate the structure. 'Ideal' innocent women images open and end the narrative, such as Martha, "a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey" (p. 4) and Linda, a narrator's friend who died when she was nine years old. The first story, *The Things They Carried* links imagination and its powers to the feminine. It "was a killer" and therefore is linked to death: women do not belong on the battlefield and men have to suppress their thoughts

of women, even imaginary ones. It portrays a story of Jimmy Cross, the twenty-four-year-old lieutenant who is a dependable, honest, and responsible man. Yet, like many men, he carries the "emotional baggage of men who might die" with him (p. 5). His becoming a soldier depends on forgetting certain emotions and facing the reality that includes women. He has to give up the romantic attachment to his girlfriend at home. The author writes, "He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White Mountains in New Hampshire. He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her, but the letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love. She was a virgin; he was almost sure" (p. 4). Smith suggests that her letters prove her "inability to respond to his love and his longing suggests the blank page of virginity in patriarchal discourse" (p. 25). Cross sees Martha as a sexualized image yet she is described as something from "another world, which was not quite real" (p. 5). Significantly, she never refers to war in her letters; being detached from it, she will never be able to understand Jimmy's experiences.

Along with the letters, Jimmy has a picture and a good luck charm from Martha. He is so preoccupied with her sexuality that his fantasy distracts him from his goal, that of being a soldier and caring for his men: "Slowly, a bit distracted he would get up and move among his men, checking the perimeter, then he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin" (p. 4). As he looks back at a date with her, he realizes that he "should've done something brave. Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should've done" (p. 6). This fantasy empowers Jimmy as his erotic desire for Martha is natural. He is "a kid at war, in love" (p. 6). Jimmy's distraction leads to the death of one of his men – Ted Lavender. This episode unites the theme of death and sexual desire: "and suddenly, without willing it, he was thinking of Martha. The stress and fractures, the quick collapse, the two of them buried alive under that weight. Dense, crushing love. …he tried to concentrate on Lee Strunk and the war, all dangers, but his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered. He wanted to know her" (p. 12). This scene also represents the gender duality. At the very moment when Jimmy is fantasizing about Martha, Ted is shot. "As if to punish himself for daydreaming and forgetting about matters of security but more deeply for abandoning his men in the desire to know the feminine: Jimmy Cross goes to the extreme of rejecting desire for Martha altogether" (Smith, 1994, p. 26). His reaction to the death is the return of death and violence: "Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men

onto the village of Than Khe. They burned everything" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 16). He feels angry and guilty for Ted's death, torn between choices of love and duty. In the words of the author, "He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry, like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (p. 16). He comes to realize that perhaps Martha "did not love him and never would" (p. 23). In order to retain his manhood, he has to cut himself off from the feminine: "He hated her. Yes, he did. He hated her. Love, too, was a hard, hating kind of love" (p. 23). Jimmy is a soldier and has to "be a man about it…No more fantasies… from this point on he would comport himself as an officer…he would dispense with love; it was not now a factor" (p. 24). Martha has to remain within the realm of the imaginary and daydreaming, and the author states that "when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere. This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, … a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity" (p. 24). Jimmy does not blame Martha for her inability to comprehend war, but in order to retain masculinity, he has to distance himself from her. O'Brien establishes certain codes for male behavior and the rejection of the feminine is a painful yet necessary experience: "It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do" (p. 25).

Male bonding is essential at war and Jimmy Cross and his men are put into the realm of cowboy movies while John Wayne is portrayed as an ideal construct of masculinity: "He might just shrug and say, 'Carry on,' then they would saddle up and form into a column and move out toward the villages west of Than Khe" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 27). The narrative critiques such concepts as theatrical poses when "men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to" (p. 27). Masculinity is often being presented as necessary, but at times it becomes a tragic destruction of selfhood. Jimmy Cross's story continues in *Love*, when he visits O'Brien years later after the war, talking "about the things we still carried throughout our lives." He still has feelings for Martha long after the war is over. Having met her at the reunion, Jimmy finds her the same distant woman she was in her letters. Jimmy has a picture of her similar to the one he destroyed during the war. He learns that "she had never married … and probably never would. She didn't know why. But as she said this, it occurred to him that there were things about her he would never know" (p. 30). Jimmy tells her he'd almost "done something brave" back in school yet Martha remains reserved and cold to his advances: "she looked at him and said she was glad he hadn't tried it. She didn't understand how men could do those

things. 'What things?' he asked, and Martha said, 'The things men do.' It began to form. 'Oh,' he said, 'those things'" (p. 31). Her invocation of 'things men do' is both sexual and destructive and opens an even wider gap between men and women. Jimmy is concerned for the public to see him as a man, a war hero. He says, "Make me out to be a good guy. … Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever" (p. 31). Nevertheless, Jimmy still carries the burden of unattainable love for Martha and wishes to hide it: "'Don't' mention anything about' - 'No,' I said, 'I won't'" (p. 31). Similarly, like many men, Jimmy Cross cannot get over the trauma of war and loss of innocence.

The male powerlessness and rejection of the female is reestablished in another vignette - *How to Tell a True War Story.* In this piece O'Brien plays with the notions of truth and fiction, things that are made up and those that are 'truer than the truth.' It presents a story of Rat Kiley who has been shaken by the death of his friend, Curt Lemon. The letter he writes to Curt's sister is a medium for delivering emotions and connecting to the world outside war: "You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. Listen to Rat Kiley. 'Cooze,' he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or a girl. He says cooze. He's nineteen years old - it's too much for him – so he looks at you with those big gentle killer eyes and says cooze, because his friend is dead and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back" (pp. 76-7). He uses improper language in regard to a woman, nevertheless she is the one to blame: "dumb cooze never writes back" (p. 76). Kiley takes out his anger at Curt's death on a baby "VC water buffalo" that he slowly kills. Smith suggests that the buffalo is a "symbol of devouring feminine sexuality as menacing as Jimmy Cross's tunnel" (p. 30). As Mitchell Sanders notices, Vietnam is the "garden of evil. Every sin's real fresh and original" and war remains an amoral, inevitable area.

Kiley reiterates the idea of the gender dichotomy as only men are able to understand other men: "Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin'. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody's sweet little virgin girlfriend" (p. 83). In the narrative, masculinity is achieved through the presence of the outsider, a woman, who is unable to grasp a man's world. It places both women characters and female readers in the position of a detachment who unlike men cannot 'get' the essence of war stories:

> When I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterwards and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually, it is an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and

> gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo made her sad. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell. (p. 90)

The female reader is distanced from a 'true war story' as the narrator strengthens the male bonding in which a woman becomes a stranger - a naïve and sentimental reader who misses the story's point altogether.

The next story that reverses the gender roles is the *Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong*, offering a view on what happens when a woman appears at war. Rat Kiley shows up in this story as he tries to tell it 'right' to his friends. The narrator claims that Rat has a reputation for "exaggeration and overstatement" but can be subjective because he "loved her." The actions Rat "recounts may or may not have happened" (Smith, 1994, p. 32) and the story plays again with the truth-fiction notion. Some critics see this vignette as a version of *The Heart of Darkness,* where the evil threat is embodied in a woman. The female is presented as the 'Other' against which "masculine identity and innocence are sympathetically defined" (Smith, p. 32). Mary Anne Bell is contrasted as different from "all those girls back home," who are "clean and innocent and how they'll never understand any of this, in a billion years" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 123). The woman warrior in this story 'understands it' because "she was there, … up to her eyeballs in it." She represents the two "points of impossibility: whether a girl could get to the "boonies" and what would happen if she did" (Kinney, 2000, p. 150). The concept of fighting the war and knowing what it feels like is a male prerogative; therefore, her story deconstructs the gender dichotomy because she was 'there.' She is portrayed as a masculine hard-core fighter, who "can be tamed with masculine narrative," notes Smith (1994, p. 32). Her trip to the war zone violates any ideas of "how and where and why women enter war stories" (Kinney, 2000, p. 150).

Mary Anne Bell undergoes a transformation by war, as is underlined by Rat Kiley: "you come over clean and you get dirty and then afterwards it's never the same. A question of degree" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 123). Rat's narrative occurs in the place where he works, namely the medical station by Green Berets base. The "greenies," according to Rat, were "animals but far from social" (p. 92). They are associated with nature and 'supernatural' powers which "magically reappear, moving like shadows through the moonlight, filing in silently from the dense rain forest off to the west" (p. 92). One of the NCO's, Eddie Diamond, suggests that they should "pool some bucks and bring in a few mamma-sans from Saigon, to spice things up" (p. 93). Men are surprised when

Mark Fossie brings along his sweetheart, Mary Anne, who is presented as both innocent and yet sexual. She is a young, "barely out of high school" all-American girl with "long white legs and blue eyes and complexion like strawberry ice-cream," who shows up in "white culottes and a sexy pink sweater" (p. 90). She represents the dream of a perfect and happy family life. She plays the traditional 'girlfriend' role, flirting with the guys and playing ball in her "cut-off blue jeans and black swimsuit top, which the guys appreciated" (p. 96).

Gradually, with her "bubbly personality," she takes an interest in the war, without knowing of danger or fear: "Mary Anne wasn't afraid to get her hands bloody" (p. 98). At first men react to her as "a real tiger, D-cup guts, trainer-bra brains" but with her quick mind she is a fast learner. She is interested in the war as it becomes something different and exciting for her, and she has never experienced it before: "… the war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery" (p. 96). Both war and Vietnam become the force that changes people, erasing gender differences: "you and me, a girl that's the only difference … when we first got here - all of us - were really young and innocent, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne" (p. 97). It is significant that she feels at "home" in Vietnam, yet she does not do any domestic chores around the camp. She begins to go 'native' to study some Vietnamese and "cook rice over a can a Sterno" (p. 97). When the wounded arrive, she "learn[s] how to clip an artery and pump up a plastic splint and shoot in morphine" (p. 99). She later learns to shoot, gradually becoming a different person.

Mary Anne acquires manly behavior and is described in masculine terms, "tight intellectual focus, confidence, new authority." Her fiancé Mark notices the changes: "her body seemed foreign somehow - too stiff in places, too firm where the softness used to be. The bubbliness was gone. The nervous giggling too" (p. 99). Her plans of a future life with Mark change as well: "Naturally we'll still get married, but it doesn't have to be right away. Maybe travel first. Maybe live together. Just test it out, you know?" (pp. 99-100). Katherine Kinney suggests that "Mary Anne has begun to question the inevitable logic of domesticity" (2000, p. 151) as her change is explained by the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s. Mark grows uncomfortable and angry when she disappears one night. He discovers she is "out on fuckin' ambush" with the Green Berets. When returning to the base, he had "trouble recognizing her. She wore a bush hat and filthy green fatigues; she carried the standard M-16 automatic assault rifle; her face was black with charcoal" (p. 102). Her changes pose a 'threat' to the male order. Mark announces

their engagement and when he tries to send her home, she disappears again into the jungle. When she returns, Mary Anne is already a part of the jungle, mysterious and powerful, she is out of Mark's reach or control. She transgresses the "boundaries of common sense … that create a sense of reality" (Kinney, 2000, p. 152). Laurie Smith argues that by becoming independent, she emasculates Mark, "as if her transformation deprives him of his own traditional eighteen-year-old initiation into manhood" (O'Brien, p. 35). He promises Rat that "he'll bring her out." They find her in a tent, surrounded by pagan worship symbols and strange music, "like an animal's den, a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh - the stink of kill" (p. 120). There is a head of a dead leopard, a stack of bones and a poster with the words "ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK! FREE SAMPLE KIT!" (p. 120). Her transformation is complete as she is no longer feminine nor human. She seems at peace with herself, yet men perceive her as 'nonhuman': "it was her eyes: utterly flat and indifferent. There was no emotion in her stare, no sense of the person behind it. The grotesque part was … her jewelry. At the girl's throat was a necklace of human tongues. Elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather, the tongues were threaded along a copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in some horrified final syllable" (p. 120). The tongue imagery signifies her being outside the social order; she merges completely with the animal world. She becomes a woman who is no longer silent; the tongue necklace empowers her as a threatening, dangerous Medusa who has the power to castrate men. There was "nothing to be done" according to the men who are appalled and shocked, while Mary Anne explains her knowledge of war: "I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country – the dirt, the death – I just want to eat it and have it inside me. That's how I feel. I get scared sometimes – lots of times – but it's not bad. You know? When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm burning away into nothing - but it does not matter because I know exactly who I am" (p. 121). In the heart of darkness, she feels independence and sexual freedom, which explains her use of the word "appetite." In a liberating sense, she moves away from a male perception as well as a male narration. Feminists may see her behavior as a deconstruction of patriarchy as well as of the "myths of American sweetheart and the American dream" (Smith, 1994, p. 35). In the end Mary Anne becomes the opposite of what a woman should be: "she was a girl, that's all. If it were a guy, everybody'd say 'Hey, no big deal'… you got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 117).

It is significant that in Mary Anne Bell's transformation there is no motive for it, nor is there any understanding of her change on the part of the men. When she first arrives Rat notices that she "shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out of the boonies" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 92). Such a statement sets out that "boonies" are the place where women do not belong. However, Vietnam becomes her place of belonging: "She wanted more; she wanted to penetrate the mystery of herself" (p. 125). In the end Mary Anne is outside the boundaries of society and its expectations; she embodies the incomprehensible and is a mystical force as she "burns away into nothing." As the author says, "one morning Mary Anne walked off into the mountains and did not come back" (p. 126). She dissolves in a "part of the land, dangerous and "ready for the kill" (p. 126). After she is gone, the order between the men is restored. Mary Anne never offers her reasons for the change. Storytelling about her brings the men together and restores the homosocial bonds between them. She is an extreme deviation of the feminine norm for the men, which helps them to maintain their sanity and manhood.

The final story of the novel is titled *The Lives of the Dead,* which merges the feminine and masculine powers of imagination. The narrator shifts between childhood memories, the present and the past. The story concentrates on two experiences: the death of a Viet Cong and the loss of a childhood friend, Linda, who dies of a brain tumor in the ninth grade. The narrator tells of a first love which combines knowledge beyond "language, something huge and permanent" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 259). In this story his self merges with the other, changing gender roles and codes. The narrator's wish is to resurrect the dead. Grieving Linda's death, he remembers her words: "Timmy, stop crying. It doesn't matter." The storytelling makes Linda real and alive. It gives her voice and power to express herself even in his own dreams of her: " 'Right now,' she said. 'I'm not dead. But when I am it's like … I don't know, it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading'" (p. 286). The memory of a dead girl reverses the opening story as the imagination here is positively redeeming. Linda is an ever-present ideal, always sweet and innocent, one who never changes. She is not destined to grow up and join women like Martha, Curt's sister, or Mary Anne Bell. She is not a threatening force, but rather an inspirational and comforting medium that helps the narrator to heal himself and get rid of the painful past. Removed from war and its horrors, she remains the healing force in the narrative.

War is a crippling and terrifying experience; however, it still contains the opposition between masculinity and femininity, necessary for men and foreign for women. Another

work of fiction which deals with the exclusion of women, the rejection of the feminine, and the restitution of the masculine is Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*. Mason's protagonist tries "both female roles suggested by the stories of O'Brien and Heinemann: humping the boonies herself and having sex with a veteran" (Kinney, p. 175). Both attempts are unsuccessful, yet they lead to the reconciliation of men and women, the war and memory, present and past.

A high school commencement speech about one's duty and sacrifice for America sets a seventeen-year-old protagonist Sam Hughes on a quest of understanding the war and its consequences: "At her graduation, the commencement speaker, had preached about keeping the country strong, stressing sacrifice. He made Sam nervous. She started thinking about war and it stayed on her mind all summer" (p. 23). She becomes obsessed with it because it was how her father had died, and her uncle had been wounded. Sam is a child of war, conceived before her father was shipped off to Vietnam and born when he was killed. She is too young to remember any information about the war and her effort to learn and comprehend it "is undermined by her society's lack of interest and male veterans' exclusivity" (Ryan, p. 43). When asking about it, the usual dismissive answers are "don't think about it, hush." Even her uncle Emmett tries to avoid talking about Vietnam with her: "Women weren't over there. So, they can't really understand" (p. 107). Sam, however, refuses to accept such dismissal: "Well, Mom took care of you all those years, and you think she didn't understand? … And what about me? I feel like there's a big conspiracy against me" (p. 107). Like O'Brien's characters, Emmett does not acknowledge the relation of women to the war. Thomas Myers notes, that "a prime theme in the works that deal even partially with the postwar experience is the radical difference in sensibility between those who have experienced the war and those who have not" (p. 195). They all echo the quintessential soldier's story: "Nobody else could ever know what you went through except guys who have been there" (Broyles, p. 78). If veterans exclude men who didn't fight and therefore cannot imagine what it was like, they enforce women's passive roles and reject their attempts to share memories. As Susan Jeffords argues, most of the narratives are a "man's story from which women are generally excluded" (49).

The women who were left at home cannot completely grasp their husbands' and brothers' experience which is different from theirs. Their lives are transformed and touched by the war's consequences. Sam belongs to a new generation who learns about the war from the TV series "M*A*S*H" rather than from live reports from Vietnam.

Fatherless and left by her mother for a new family, Sam lives with her uncle Emmett who is more like a brother to her. Despite the age gap, they share common tastes in food, music, and TV shows as if belonging to the same generation. Evan Carton argues that they are "driven to exchange gender roles" (p. 312). His real sister, Sam's mother, has abandoned Emmett, who returned from the war physically and psychologically wounded. She sees him as "messed up" and hopeless while Sam "can't leave Emmett" (pp. 23, 56). Sam does not listen to her mother's advice of forgetting the war and says, "You want to pretend the whole Vietnam War never existed, like you want to protect me from something" (p. 167). Sam encourages Emmett to see a doctor about his face (which she suspects may be caused by Agent Orange), to get a job, start dating and, most important of all, to be healed of the trauma of the war experience.

By reading her father's letters home and talking to the veterans, Sam is determined to figure out the war, yet she lacks information: "it's hard to find out anything" (p. 94). She knows that "whenever she had tried to imagine Vietnam, she had had her facts all wrong" (p. 210). In her father's letters she finds out that he did not know the facts either, what kind of operation he was in or where the enemy was. The truth is inaccessible and all he was doing was "remembering our purpose here" (p. 202). Dwayne Hughes's understanding of his duty is based on the ideology and gender roles society imposes on people. He writes later: "Irene seems so far away to be real. But it's all for her and the baby, or else why are we here?" (p. 202). "Men bear arms, women bear children, and these two essential activities are intimately connected" (Carton, p. 310). Gender roles are divided in the war: its "identification of gender roles as biological destiny for both men and women, and its restriction of women to biological - thus excluding them from the arenas of social - reproduction" (Jeffords, pp. 87-115).

The novel plays with this concept as Sam's female sexuality prevents her from entering the war experience. The desire to discover what it is really like forces Sam to sleep with Tom, a wounded veteran and one of Emmett's friends, and this allows her to cross over the division "between herself and war" (p. 181). Kinney suggests that "Vietnam becomes the metaphoric language for Sam's sexual discoveries" (p. 181). After the dance Sam leaves with Tom, she feels "was doing something intensely daring, like following the soldier on point. A pool of orange light from the mercury lamp was the color of napalm" (p. 124). Tom is not dangerous but rather new and different as for Sam "men were a total mystery" (p. 184). As she tells Tom, she wishes to know what it was like. She always imagines Vietnam as a postcard with beautiful trees and rice paddies.

"His body seems to offer her a literally sensual text of the war" (p. 181) as this experience allows Sam to get some answers to her questions. Tom's impotency is marked by being 'over there' and although she is upset and frustrated with it, war is a "source of empowerment" for her (p. 182). Sam's desire helps Tom not to heal physically but rather to consider some possibilities for recovery and gives him hope for the change. Dwayne's diary offers Sam that sense of immediacy she fails to establish with Tom. Its reality brings war closer to her: "it disgusted her, with the rotting corpse, her father's shriveled feet, his dead buddy, those sickly-sweet banana leaves" (p. 206). In a sense she becomes her father's child as "she realized her own intensive curiosity was just like her father's. She felt humiliated and disgusted. The diary made her wonder what she would do in his situation. Would she call them gooks?" (p. 205). Kinney suggests that "what fuels her disgust is her fear of identification with him" (p. 183). By recognizing herself in him Sam feels "scripted into the diary and the war." Discovering how big a part of the war she is, she decides to experience it: "if men went to war for women, then she was going to find out what they went through" (p. 208).

Despite her mother's and Emmett's advice to forget it, she cannot because "it had everything to do with me" (p. 71). Sam comes to the realization that she idealizes her ideas about war as well as her father's contribution. She has been "told so often what a miracle it was that she came along to compensate for the loss of Dwayne" (p. 192). She no longer romanticizes her parents' marriage, interrogating the culture codes. Of her friend's pregnancy she thinks that "it was as though Dawn had been captured by body snatchers" (p. 155). Childbirth and war are linked in the novel. As she sees a picture of a woman with a dead child it becomes a "colonization of consciousness and body equivalent, in its effects on the country boys who serve, to pregnancy and motherhood for the girls fulfilling their prescribed destinies in Hopewell" (Carton, p. 311). If her friend Dawn pierces numerous holes in her ears as a sign of female sexuality, in the same way men in Vietnam cut off the ears of their enemy as a symbol of manhood and power. The veterans who come home are "sexually impotent or emotionally deadened" (Carton, p. 312), just as Sam's friend is self-destructive: "The jungle was closing in … since Dawn got pregnant Sam had been feeling that if she didn't watch her step her whole life could be ruined by some mischance, some stupid surprise like sniper's fire" (p. 189). Sam resists the culture expectation of her role as a woman to which Dawn submits: "she was feeling the delayed stress of Vietnam War. It was her inheritance. It was her version of Dawn's trouble" (p. 89). Childbearing and war are both exclusive areas, "enforcing basic gender distinction that women nurture and men kill" (Kinney, p. 179).

When she suggests an abortion Dawn "pretends [she] didn't hear it." For Dawn pregnancy is a chance to get married and move away from her life while Sam sees it as a return of the past: "She'll be like my mother, stuck in this town, raising a kid" (p. 184). Sam returns Lonnie's ring and to his question why, she simply says "It's hard to describe. You sort of have to be there" (p. 185). Lonnie cannot understand her as in his mind she has been "reading too many of them Vietnam books" (p. 185). Sam goes outside the boundaries of gender roles rebelling against the choices imposed on people by society.

In her own way, Sam tries to have her own "in country" experience of war at night at Cawood's pond, the same place Emmett had a flashback from the war. She wishes for the same experience her father had. Her trip is "both escape from and running toward her knowledge of her father, of war and of herself" (Kinney, p. 184). She goes into the night to "hump the boonies," trying not to be afraid of the dark she reenacts the experience of the jungle Emmett and other veterans had. Sam's "war experience" is "Mason's ironic replication of the Vietnam experience" (Ryan, p. 53). Despite her efforts to be like men she fails; her enemy is a raccoon, and her C-rations are chips and snack bars. Sam realizes that if "it was up for women, there wouldn't be any war. No, that was a naïve thought. When women got power, they were just like men" (p. 208). Sam tries to feel what men must have felt: "men were nostalgic about killing. It aroused something in them" (p. 209). She knows this attempt is a onetime experience: "She felt so stupid. She couldn't dig a foxhole even if she had to" (p. 212). In the wild she imagines the rice paddy and the mined swamp, the insects and the heat (p. 208). Yet she realizes that "this nature preserve in a protected corner of Kentucky wasn't like Vietnam at all" (p. 214). Like any woman left in an isolated place she has a fear of rape. Sam is 'saved' by her uncle who is "worried … half to death" (p. 218), "a reversal of Sam's earlier search, in a frenzy of maternal protectiveness, for the missing Emmett" (Carton, p. 313). She fails in her attempt to "hump the boonies" as "an effort to transcend gender difference" (Kinney, p. 184).

This Cawood's pond experience is more climatic to Emmett than to Sam as he finds her in the woods and tells her, "You think you can go through what we went through in the jungle, but you can't. This place is scary and things can happen to you, but it's not the same as having snipers and mortar fire and shells and people shooting at you from behind bushes" (p. 220). Emmett's father had always encouraged him to go to war, saying, "The Army will make a man out of you" (p. 149). Returning home, he tries to reject the identity army made him into. He can confront the war experience he could

not face for so long: "There's something wrong with me. I'm damaged. It's like something in the center of my heart is gone and I can't get it back" (p. 225). For the first time he can tell Sam about his experience in Vietnam and says, "When I read this diary I tried to imagine what I would have done, and this is what I would have done" (p. 221). Emmett comes out of his paralysis and is reborn as a new person: "they have changed places,' she thought" (p. 229).

In the novel Mason attempts to create a presence of war. When Sam enters the school for a dance, "in the corners it was dark, like a foxhole where an infantryman would lie crouched for the night, under his poncho, spread above" (p. 120). Sam realizes that books or TV series do not reflect "what it was like to be at war over there" (p. 48). As the novel ends, Emmett succeeds in finding a job and going to the Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Sam's concern and interest in the war helped Emmett to overcome the trauma and years of "grieving" (p. 241). His healing is complete as he reads the names of his friends on the Memorial wall: "He is sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames" (p. 245).

As Sam touches her father's name on the wall, it seems like "all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall" (p. 245). She also finds her own name on the wall, the name of the unknown soldier "Sam Alan Hughes". She reunites with her father, connecting to the Vietnam experience and "representing all of those who have been excluded and now brought back" (Jeffords, p. 64): "She is just beginning to understand. She will never really know what happened to all these men in the war" (p. 240). Jeffords argues that despite the fact that a female is the protagonist in the novel, "the mechanism for the generation of collectivity is still … the masculine bond" as her reunion with her father is "a superficial one that exists through the inanimate stone of the Vietnam Memorial" (pp. 63-4). However, Sam's identity is dead and now is reborn as "Sam Hughes." Seeing her father's name takes away the mystery and some authority of his: "she feels funny, touching it. A scratching on the rock. Writing. Something for future archeologists to puzzle over …" (p. 244). Her father was a country boy who did not belong to Vietnam like Sam who does not fit Cawood's pond. In the end, Sam leaves Hopewell as Dawn and Emmett will take her place. In her quest she fulfills the challenge of becoming a different person. She starts to understand the masculine part of herself. She completes her search and, as the novel ends with the vision of names on the wall, it brings home to the readers that Americans must see their own names on the wall to accept and recognize the past. Similar to Sam, readers must assume "a part in the wall's – and the

war's production, and a share of its material consequences and moral burden, in order to begin to design an American community less intimate but more promising than the communion of men in battle" (Carton, p. 316). In the end, she figures out her cultural identity as she lets go of the past and accepts her own Otherness.

Conclusion

Gender is the complex "matrix through which Vietnam is read, interpreted, and reframed in modern culture (Jeffords 53). It represents masculine bonding as "a basis for regeneration of society as a whole" (74) and this motif of Vietnam images helps to establish " the victim status for the white male" which enacts and sanctions the appropriation of the feminine and marginalizing of women by men. In order to maintain the stability of institutions and structures, the Masculine must exclude from its realm what it defines itself against the Feminine. Therefore, war fiction contributes to our understanding of gender dichotomy. Whenever women appear in the narrative, they are never included in the "brotherhood" created by men; they cannot grasp the male war experience and if they are present, they appear as destructive and threatening creatures. Yet Vietnam War fiction, and *The Things They Carried* and *In Country* in particular, reveals that despite men's attempts to exclude women from the Vietnam experience, their own behavior, homosocial bonding, and selfhood are closely related and connected to feminine values and qualities, from representation of the body to the mundane and the domestic. Women may be unable to identify with the male experiences of war, nevertheless, they search for a different kind of knowledge men do not always have. Therefore, Vietnam War narratives should be read not as a "subgenre of popular fiction, but as an emblem of a cultural reformation of masculinity," (Jeffords, 1989, p. 62). For that reason, both Tim O'Brien and Mason have been named the best writers of their generation. Their works contribute to the understanding of human nature, beyond the complex and separating gender categories as well as the nuances and ambiguities of moral issues that their male and female characters must face. Literature often offers us salvation and these writers provide wisdom and deep compassion for the readers. This is why their work will stand the test of time for generations to come.

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