

**Posttraumatic Memories and Feelings of Guilt in Tim O'Brien's  
*The Things They Carried***

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**ABSTRACT:**

Writing has long been related to communicating emotional experiences. One of these experiences is war, and the Vietnam War was a long brutal struggle divided into two periods. The first is called the good Vietnam War, covering the years from 1964 to 1968. The second spanned from 1968 to 1972, known as the bad Vietnam War, through which fighting turned into guerilla war. Battles of the second phase were characterized by savage killings of soldiers and mass murder of unarmed civilian Vietnamese. This bad war inspired many literary narratives in drama, fiction, and poetry. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is considered one of the most read and vivid works about this struggle. The text reflects combatants' engagements in foreign lands and their inability to adjust to the trauma after the war is over. This paper investigates the situations of various characters in the novel and how their experiences were influential in preventing them from normally continuing with their lives. Post-traumatic memories and permanent feelings of guilt and confusion are the main obstacles veterans face preempting them from indulging once again in society.

**Keywords:** guilt, trauma, Tim O'Brien, veteran, Vietnam.

**1. Introduction**

Literature of the Vietnam War is known for its sharpness and recognition of the days of war because most of those who wrote about it were writing of real experiences. It is famous for its visual portrayal of the bloody accidents, attacks, and battles that result in huge loss of casualties. What makes Vietnam War literature infamous is that the war was illegal, it was based on forged evidence, and it faced severe

public rejection. The war did not present the Americans as idealistic or honorable, for there were many violations of the US military Law of War and the Geneva Conventions. Many of the participants in this war feel guilty until this day, and those who want to feel fine about it are convincing themselves that they were trying to prevent a communist or totalitarian regime from coming into being (Vigil 1999: 306).

Vietnam literature is usually disturbing. It represents access to experiencing the horrible slaughter and acts as a panorama of the days of the war. It stresses physical description and details of the inhumane mass killings of civilians, villagers, innocent people, and even children and newborns, sometimes as an act of avenging dead soldiers. Unlike writers of the other wars who relieve the reader from the heavy representation of killing by insinuating the attention to a love story, family, or victory, writers of the Vietnam War are insistent on grabbing the readers into Vietnam's jungles, putting the painful reality in their faces. Any other subject does not balance the horrors of the war; burlesque interludes are absurd here (Anisfield 1987: 5). Not because of humane numbness, or immorality, writers write this way to thrust the reader into the awful experience of war to formulate a critical review, to understand what happened for all of this, was it worthy of what soldiers endured and died for?

Writing became the psychological outlet for the veteran authors to tranquil the raging furnace of war memories. They write authentic accounts of their days in the strange lands. Their works have no catharsis; the whole narrative is a series of episodes depicting the terrors and pathos of friends' murder until the final parts. Soldiers are suspended in no-man's-land in a hopeless situation that foreshadows no salvation.

## **2. “Good” and “Bad” Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War was a defining event of its generation, a fight that lasted almost twenty years. It greatly influenced United States' politics, soldiers, citizens and society in general (Stafford 2002: 16). According to psychologists, the Vietnam War could be divided into two types. The first was the so-called "good" war, which lasted from 1964 to 1968. The second was the “bad” war which took place from 1968-1972. According to Hochgesang, Lawyer, and Stevenson, the

"bad war" period was when the Vietnam War turned into a guerrilla war, and booby traps and mines heavily injured American troops. As a result, the distinction between enemy soldiers and civilian non-combatants became muddled (1999: 67).

The idea of "good war" refers to battles free from immorality, mass killing and destruction. In an ideal situation, soldiers return home happy and well-adjusted, eager to resume their lives (Mahini 2018: 4). On the contrary, the bad war has no moral causes and is accompanied by vast unnecessary destructions for the associations of the enemy, thus "veterans of the stigmatized 'bad' war become 'bad' veterans, 'bad' citizens, and 'bad' humans" (Stafford 2002: 4).

The distinction between "good" and "bad" Vietnam War phases is helpful in describing the dramatic changes in American troops' morale and behavior over time. Soldiers comprehended that the basis behind the war was flawed and wrong. This second phase of the Vietnam War has been rich material for accounts, biographies and literary writings, especially poetry and novels. What is common about these writings is the negative attitude people had about veterans of this war (Stafford 2002: 1-2).

### **3. American veterans of the Vietnam War**

The fact that Vietnam War turned out to be a humiliating military defeat shocked the whole United States. Vietnam Veterans—living symbols of the trauma—were frequently ignored or treated with hatred and rejection "The Vietnam War did not end the day America began withdrawing from Vietnam. The violence persisted on the home front as veterans were either demonized or simply rendered invisible" (qt in Schmeidl 2011: 7).

Soldiers were mainly left alone with their traumas and were considered social outcasts, making it difficult for them to reintegrate into American society. In his "The Reception Home," Michael Traynor frankly states how Vietnam War veterans were paid no courtesy or respect back home:

The protesters, or the people would spit on us. The people that said whatever we got over there, we deserved it, for being over there. It was just total lack of respect. When I got home, my wife (now ex) told me that she didn't want to hear anything about it. And I was

literally choking trying to talk to somebody but nobody wanted to hear it... (Traynor 1968).

Veterans have had enough in battle. Post-traumatic memories are stored in their minds for years after the war was ended, for the accidents they witnessed are influential to the extent of making different persons of them. In his memoir Thomas H. Hodge says:

you have to go into a cold mind. You know, when I say that, you know, if a buddy of yours gets shot and killed.... and once you see this happen day in, day out - the enemy getting killed, you got bodies lying here and there. Your mind starts to get cold (Hodge 2002).

Following a catastrophic experience, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is defined as flashbacks, distressing memories, and anxiety. Only five years after the Vietnam War ended, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was formally recognized as a mental health problem. These symptoms have been described in soldiers from many wars for hundreds of years under various titles. Vietnam Veterans, on the other hand, were the first to be labeled with the name "post-traumatic stress disorder." (Gustafsson 2009: 129).

For most veterans, memories make burdens, weights they cannot accept as part of themselves. John Carry, the retired lieutenant, states: "we wish that a merciful God wipe away our memories of that service as easily as this administration has wiped away their memory of us" (Kerry 1971). Soldiers could not assimilate into the same society they left for Vietnam; people viewed them as criminals instead of victims, not war heroes. Because of what they have faced of ill-treatment, most of them felt that home is no more a place to feel secure, a place that is strange to them, a place where people they had known put it in their face that they should feel guilty for participating in an unjust war. In his *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War*, published almost a decade after the Vietnam experience was finished, W.D. Ehrhart (1995: 55) explains his going home after finishing a full tour i.e., more than one year abroad in battle:

when I'd gotten back to the States, I discovered that in my absence America had become an alien place in which and to which I no longer seemed to belong... I was depressed and unhappy, drinking heavily and thinking suicidally when I was sober enough to think at all. Somewhere in the dim fog, I knew I had to get out of there ... And so within a few months of returning stateside I had requested orders back to Vietnam where at least it made sense to be lonely.

Exposing his frustration and anger, W.D. Ehrhart expresses his personal and political awakening as a Vietnam veteran in the states. His doubts about this tragic conflict were shortly affirmed after his rebirth as an aware American and finally feeling strong enough to announce his perspectives about the government, the country, and himself. He felt estranged and pained trying to communicate with others. Still, the barrier was hard to bridge between him and his friends because of being unable to trust him, in addition to the psychological crisis he felt in himself: "...feeling guilty and disgusted with myself. It was a constant battle between my near - obsessive fear of sleeping alone and my battered sense of self-respect" (1995: 129).

#### **4. Memories in *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien**

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien tells the accounts of combatants who served in the Vietnam War and were traumatized and guilt-ridden due to their experiences. The author employs images to assist the readers in seeing themselves in the troops' shoes by explaining how the deaths of so many people have a profound impact on those impacted, leading to the men losing their sense of humanity (Hassebrock 2009: 2-3).

The book comprises 22 short stories meant as chapters linked together, with some characters appearing in several chapters. Individual chapters can stand alone, but the collection is intended to be read as a whole. In this autobiographical account of O'Brien's participation in the Vietnam War, he speaks about the effectiveness of stories in making memories present. The novel echoes memories that make both burdens and blessings. Questions stuck in the minds of the veterans during and after the war expressing feelings of frustration and wonder "Why have we become refugee? To think? To make believe? To play games, chasing poor Cacciato? Is that why? Or did we come for better reasons? To be happy? To find peace and live good lives?" (O'Brien 1991: 27).

O'Brien uses the chapter "Spin" to convey what appears to be an endless series of tragic incidents and the emotional toll they take on the soldiers. "The horrible stuff never stops, it lives in its own dimension, recreating itself again and over," (1991: 32) he explains. The story puts the emotional implications of being part of the conflict into perspective. For O'Brien, the memories of the battle cannot cease

"replaying," as he feels imprisoned in a cycle that constantly forces him to think about death and loss. This makes it practically hard for him to achieve mental tranquility free of the traumas of war (Marini, Katherine L Fiori and Janet M Wilmoth and Anica Pless Kaiser and Lynn M Martire 2019: 36).

To O'Brien, the atrocities of war "live" in their own "dimension," in the minds of soldiers. He personifies the soldiers' memories and gives them a life of their own, demonstrating their true power. Their existence in another dimension communicates that they are beyond the soldiers' control and hence cannot be eliminated or forgotten; they overpower and overwhelm their brains with negativity as they loop in their minds over and over (Matthew 1994: 12).

By employing vivid imagery, the author shows how the dread of war overpowers war participants and hinders them from feeling normal as humans. O'Brien continues to use imagery to demonstrate how emotions and feelings are never lost. In the chapter "Night Life," the character Rat Kiley faces an emotional fit when he sees a mutilated body, he explains "These pictures in my head they won't quit. I'll see a guy's liver. The actual liver" (1991: 211). In showing how this mental image "won't quit," the author is trying to tell the reader that such a harrowing experience of seeing a liver of a person who once was a friend is hard to remove from the mind. The character's frequent mentioning of the image confirms that it is grained in his brain. The text expresses that emotions and memories that follow are much more potent than the physical experience itself.

The physical things that each man carries during war accompany the emotional toll that he bears. Soldiers' emotional loads during and after the war are grief, dread, love, and longing. Henry Dobbins, for example, from the chapter "Stocking," carries his girlfriend's stocking around his neck as a reminder of a world safe and comforting away from war. Reinforcing the idea that femininity serves as a soothing reminder of home, Henry Dobbins keeps it as a talisman and a good-luck bringer (Herzog 2018: 5).

In chapter 16, entitled "Notes", Norman Bowker discusses his emotional breakdown years after the war and how he continued to lose his identity. "there's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In



general. My life, I mean. It's almost like I got killed over in Nam . . . Hard to describe. That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him .. Feels like I'm still in deep shit” (1991: 150). His description of how he almost died despite being physically alive demonstrates how his sense of being a functioning human has been gone as a result of his trauma and loss. He can no longer cope with his life or get engaged in society in a way that allows him to feel peace of mind and a sense of humanity. Individuals whose minds have been torn apart by war cannot simply forget the horrible experiences they have been forced to suffer. These experiences create eternal feelings that often influence them negatively.

The author's several imageries in the novel emphasize how war not only robs people of serenity and normalcy but that the emotions evoked by catastrophic physical experiences are more substantial and permanent. The author is speaking for the many soldiers who have been affected and are experiencing emotional anguish due to their participation in combat on the front lines of war.

Reflections of soldiers' memories are used in the novel to reveal cowardly self-image and fear over not being good enough or heroic in critical situations. When they replay a regretful recollection in their minds, they strive to make it appear as if it was impossible to achieve. Consequently, it would not look shameful in memory, and they won't feel guilty (Tran 2010: 123).

For example, in the episode “Speaking of Courage,” Norman Bowker is a character who is unable to move on a memory for which he considers himself responsible. Although he achieved seven medals, he cannot wipe away the memory of losing his friend Kiowa. “Norman Bowker remembers how he had taken hold of Kiowa's boot and pulled hard, but how the smell was too much, and how he'd backed off and lost the Silver Star that way. He wished he could've explained some of this” (O'Brien 1991: 143). He cannot escape the idea that people are frowning with disappointment and judging him as a coward.

Usually, people seek praise and admiration to maintain their reputation. When they can't forgive themselves for not being brave enough in a crisis, their memories undergo frequent reconsideration to

justify why they weren't capable of stepping up. Replaying guilt in one's mind can lead to disappointment and a lack of confidence in one's abilities (Marini et al. 2019: 54). What consumes veterans is their overthinking about traumatic experiences, which controls their minds to the point of preventing them from forgiving themselves for being unable to do something easy to accomplish:

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the shit field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain (O'Brien 1991: 152).

Some of Tim O'Brien's experiences continue to haunt him. One of the instances was when he assassinated a man who was very similar to himself, following the orders of the authorities without justification. He was filled with shame and guilt as he stared at the man. He even imagined how the guy's life would be if he didn't kill him "His life was a constellation of possibilities... He devoted his life to studies... He spent his nights alone, wrote romantic poems in his journal..he fell in love with a classmate, a girl of seventeen" (O'Brien 1991: 122).

The psychological weights men bear during the conflict continue to characterize them after the war. Many of the stories in the novel are about these participants' attempts to come to terms with their experiences. Participants who survive carry guilt, confusion, and bloody experiences of the combat. The grief-stricken Norman Bowker from "Speaking of Courage" drives without apparent reason around his hometown, having no outlet for his sorrow. He writes a long letter explaining how he never felt right after participating in the war and finally hangs himself.

In *The Things They Carried*, shame and guilt are recurring and often inextricable themes. Soldiers felt compelled to fight because fleeing would shame them, their families, and their communities. In addition to the embarrassment, there's the shame of not being "masculine" enough—not being bold, heroic, or patriotic enough to save the situation. They feel responsible for the deaths of troops in



their platoons, the deaths of Vietnamese soldiers, and for being inadequate (Hassebrock 2009: 37).

When they look for someone to blame, they look for it on a large scale blaming the war, American voters, and the Viet Cong. On a personal scale, they blame a physician who mistreats O'Brien's wound or when they blame a soldier for his inadequacy to choose a proper spot to set up camp for the night. For example, in the story "In the Field," soldiers blame Lieutenant Jimmy Cross for placing them in a precarious place (Tran 2010: 122).

O'Brien detailed what his fellow soldiers in Vietnam took into battle, both literally and metaphorically "They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or the weak. They carried infection ....They carried the sky" (O'Brien, 1991 14). However, after the experience is over, veterans share heavier burdens. What is mutual among Vietnam Veterans is withdrawal from family and friends and avoiding objects, locations, thoughts, and events they may connect with the traumatic memories. They kept showing exaggerated negative attitudes towards the entire world and facing trouble in experiencing happy emotions. They became emotionally sensitive and irritable on the slightest occasion.

Megan Gerber (2020: 1) describes her meeting a Vietnam veteran at Veterans Affairs (VA) medical center. After knowing that he was a patient of COVID-19, she asked how is he doing and was startled by his answer, "I feel like I'm in Vietnam." Feeling strange intimacy, Garber dared to add, "How is this like Vietnam for you?" he replied, "indecisive leadership, the constant invisible threat and feeling on edge." Memories of the Vietnam experience lasted for more than fifty years in the mind of this veteran and are awakened by the least incidents.

## **5. Conclusion**

Books about the Vietnam War abound with stories of painful wounds that plague the bodies and souls of individuals who lived through the violent and lengthy conflict long after it ended. Veterans are troubled with memories of images of killing, blood, and blowing

of villages. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a consequence of this bloody war; it is the outcome earned particularly by the United States.

The clearest message that O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* communicates is that; there are no winners in war. The novel captures the life of soldiers in Vietnam and comments on war as more about boredom and loss than heroism and patriotism. In an interview, decades after the war, the author declares that he still carries the war inside him, remembering the people, fellow soldiers, and places there in Vietnam, and adds responsibility and a sense of abiding guilt. O'Brien admits that memories of Vietnam and the experiences of being near death stay the strongest and most vivid memories he and other veterans have.

O'Brien ends his novel with a chapter entitled "The Lives of the Dead." In this final chapter, he states that he writes about dead fellows to make them alive again. In an attempt to relieve himself from the pathos of his memory, he imagines them smiling, sitting up, and returning to the world. To him, this is not only saving the lives of those characters by writing their stories; writing also saves his life.

He concludes that man's sense of responsibility towards his family, friends, and country significantly influenced him more than his politics. Affirming his statement in the chapter How to Tell a True War Story, he says that a real war story isn't about war; it is about love and memory, about sisters and brothers who never wrote back to each other.

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## ذكريات ما بعد الصدمة ومشاعر الذنب في رواية تيم أوبراين "الأشياء التي حملوها"

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لطالما ارتبطت الكتابة بتوصيل التجارب العاطفية. واحدة من هذه التجارب هي الحرب، وكانت حرب فيتنام صراعا قاسيا طويلا تم تقسيمه إلى فترتين. يسمى الأول حرب فيتنام الجيدة، التي تغطي السنوات من ١٩٦٤ إلى ١٩٦٨. امتدت الفترة الثانية من عام ١٩٦٨ إلى عام ١٩٧٢، وعُرفت باسم حرب فيتنام السيئة، وتحول القتال فيها إلى حرب عصابات. تميزت اشتباكات المرحلة الثانية بالقتل الوحشي للجنود والقتل الجماعي للفيتناميين العزل. ألهمت هذه الحرب السيئة عددا من الاعمال الأدبية في المسرح والرواية والشعر. وتعد رواية تيم أوبراين "الأشياء التي حملوها" واحدة من أكثر الأعمال قراءة وواقعية حول هذا الصراع. يعرض النص معارك المقاتلين في الأراضي البعيدة وصعوبة تكيفهم مع الصدمة بعد انتهاء الحرب. يتحرى البحث اوضاع الشخصيات المختلفة في الرواية وتأثرهم بهذه التجربة إلى حدٍ حال دون استمرار حياتهم بشكل طبيعي. ومن العقبات الرئيسية التي يواجهها المحاربون هي ذكريات ما بعد الصدمة والاحساس المستمر بالذنب والحيرة والتي تمنعهم من الانغماس مرة أخرى في المجتمع.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الذنب، الصدمة، تيم اوبراين، محارب، فييتنام.