
Shattered Realities: Fragmented Storytelling and Trauma in Vietnam War Literature

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Abstract:

The Vietnam War, long enduring, thick with intrigue, and shockingly complex, a war most never thought we should enter, was surely the most contentious, polarizing issue of the 20th century; America's involvement in Vietnam has left deep footprints, not only on worldwide politics, but on language and literature and culture. In particular, the present article surveys the literary responses to the Vietnam War, exploring how the different kinds of persuasive writing, including poetry, memoirs and novels, treated the horrors, pain, and inner battle aftereffects of the War. This article probes into how the language of the war was spoken and represented in literature and the manner in which literary works both mirrored and moulded public perceptions of the war, the soldier, and the politics of the war. The article contains studies of texts such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, and addresses how writers have advanced an understanding of the war's emotional and cultural consequences. In so doing, says the article, the literature provides us with a mirror to history and a tool with which to work through collective trauma.

The Vietnam War, arguably the most important, divisive war of the 20th century, had far reaching influence not only on world affairs, but on literature, language, and culture. This article studies literary responses to the Vietnam War, describing how various types of material written, be it poetry or memoirs and novels give impression of the horrors and traumas and the psychological consequences of the war. Through an analysis of the language employed to convey the war, this article examines how literary pieces both mirrored and influenced public perception of the war, the troops, and the politics. In doing so, the article aims to demonstrate how the literature is a double act of witness to history and collective trauma working through.

Keywords: Vietnam War, literature, language, trauma, war literature, Tim O'Brien, Michael Herr, post-Vietnam, psychological impact, cultural representation.

Introduction:

A highly controversial struggle, the Vietnam War pitted the communist troops of North Vietnam (under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh) against the anti-communist resistance in South Vietnam, backed by the United States. Deeply influenced by its Cold War context, the war was largely a manifestation of fears that communism would spread throughout Southeast Asia, in accordance with the domino theory. The United States, staunch in its fight against the spread of communism, militarized further after the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident saw American troops mobilize to help the South Vietnamese government.

Crucial battles and events like the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the My Lai Massacre highlighted the brutality and difficulties of the war, and the extensive use of guerilla warfare by the Viet Cong prevented American forces from winning a clear victory. The war also came under heavy domestic criticism in the United States, and protests and public outcry increased as the war continued without apparent progress. The U.S. pulled out in 1973, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, and fighting persisted until April 30, 1975, when the fall of Saigon brought about the reunification of Vietnam under communist rule. The war has since been remembered for the mental scars, the rich traditions and the societal disillusionment it left behind. The war was still being memed by the nation and its former fighting men, who sought in it, moral meaning, which meant little more than unpacking the ironies of the conflict and the influence it had had upon the soldiers and the people of the communities from which the boys (sometimes, for the oldest, the men) had come.

The Vietnam War is both history and an epochal cultural event whose import in literature continues to feed generations' imagination of the war itself and what it means to be at war. Writers like Tim O'Brien, Michael Herr and others exposed the insurmountable challenge of guys battling both the enemy and their own minds. With their disjointed narratives, unreliable narrators, and scenes suffused with graphic violence, they portrayed a war that was as concerned with psychological survival as it was with physical combat. In addition, the article considers how these works depict the evolving American perspective on war, heroism, and national identity and informs the moral and ethical discourse about the war. The piece argues that Vietnam War literature has generated a legacy for us to make sense not only of the war, but indeed of violence, trauma and the war's enduring influence on culture and language.

Historical Context of the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War is tied in with the history and politics of Southeast Asia in the mid-20 th century. The majority of former colonies, Vietnam fought for independence after suffering French colonial domination for year in the region.

Vietnam was a French colony in French Indochina throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, leading to a nationalist movement that sought independence. One of the many leaders of this movement was communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, who led the Viet Minh, a communist-dominated resistance group that fought against French colonial oppression (Karnow 25).

After the Japanese, who had occupied Vietnam during WWII, were defeated, the French tried to regain their former colony and a war ensued known as the First Indochina War (1946–1954) when the Viet Minh fought the French. This war culminated in French defeat in 1954 in the battle of Dien Bien Phu (Prados 48). Under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords, Vietnam would be partitioned at the 17th parallel and the North would have a communist regime with Democratic Republic leader Ho Chi Minh in power while the South was to be headed by an anti-communist government under Emperor Bao Dai and later President Ngo Dinh Diem (Logevall 92).

Although its goal was reunification, the split became permanent due to ideological differences. The United States, heavily involved in the Cold War, pursued a policy throughout of containment of Soviet communism. The American leaders felt as though if Vietnam went over to the communists, so would the rest of Indochina, or much of Southeast Asia for that matter, in what was referred to as the "domino theory" (Karnow 102). Consequently, in 1955, the U.S. started providing aid to the government of South Vietnam to help stop the spread of communism. The Cold War politics of the post-WWII period greatly influenced the Vietnam War. Fighting on several fronts against one another and fearing the outbreak of World War 3, the United States and the Soviet Union used proxy wars such as Vietnam as a proving ground for their respective ideologies. The U.S. viewed its involvement in Vietnam as a piece of a larger plan to contain the spread of communism. This foreign policy strategy of containment and its ideological justification as formulated by American statesman George Kennan, defined the Vietnam Conflict as central theatre in this dialectic conflict between capitalism and communism (Gaddis 45).

By the early 1960s the state of affairs in South Vietnam was steadily worsening. The communist National Front (NLF) for the Liberation of South Vietnam, known as the Viet Cong, that emerged in the late 1950s undermined Diem's credibility, and North Vietnam initiated a low-level campaign of sabotage to overthrow Diem's government. Amid a weakening South Vietnamese government and with the birth of an expanding communist insurrection, the United States found a growing stake and eventually military advisers and even troops were deployed to end such communist power (Logevall 106). The second would be the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, during which North Vietnamese troops were said to have

assaulted American warships, and the result - the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, providing US President Lyndon B. Johnson with the power to dramatically raise American military involvement in Vietnam (Karnow 176).

By 1965, U.S. combat forces were fully deployed, marking the beginning of full-scale military operations in Vietnam. This intervention, however, would lead to one of the most prolonged and controversial wars in U.S. history (Prados 99).

Global Impact and Consequences for Vietnam and the United States:

The Vietnam War had significant effects on the United States and the soldiers it drafted to fight in Vietnam and many people were highly against the war. For Vietnam the war inflicted a great wound, expecting that human suffering and environmental and cultural devastation and the crushing of the revolutionaries and war heroes. The war, in which roughly three million Vietnamese were killed, including civilians, and some four million injured, while hundreds of thousands were made homeless, millions more fled the country. The Americans' bombing raids that fell not only on North Vietnam but also Laos and Cambodia yielded extensive environmental damage, and they bequeathed long-term scars to the landscape (Prados 215). The human cost of war in the eyes of the Vietnamese were also the psychological and social aspects of the major destruction, which only extended the problems of trying to build a nation that was decimated by war (Herman 95).

The Vietnam War was an enormously tumultuous time for the United States. The war also caused a deep rift in American society, catalysing an outpouring of protests, particularly among college students and anti-war campaigners. The controversial aspects of the war resulted in a public debate on American values, and on contemporary American society. Media coverage, often including grim images and accounts of atrocities like the My Lai Massacre, successfully transported the war home, thus contributing to the antiwar movement (Hallin 172). A great financial burden of the war fell on the home front, causing inflation, increased national debt, and the reduction of social programs. The economic pressures and growing domestic opposition were among the reasons the United States reviewed its foreign policy and military strategy. American troops are also suffering long-term psychological effects from the war, with many soldiers returning home from the war plagued by what is now commonly referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman 146).

Worldwide, the Vietnam War left a significant impact on world power relations and with long lasting effects on U.S. foreign policy. The fact that the United States could not win a decisive military victory was a blow to its credibility and influence in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia. This loss empowered communist forces around the world which resulted in the fall of Cambodia, Laos and the unification of Vietnam under communist control in 1975 (Gaddis 56). It reduced

the U.S. proclivity to intervene with the military in new conflicts, an event that was labelled the “Vietnam Syndrome,” (Prados 311).

Literary Responses to the Vietnam War

The 20th century's most controversial conflict, the Vietnam War has always inspired a wide range of literature on the battlefield, in the officer's club, in the halls of government, and for decades after the last American troops were airlifted from a Saigon rooftop. Novelists, poets, and memoirists have written about the psychic and emotional scars of the war, each in a different manner adding to the collective literature of the Vietnam War. Poetry has served as a significant vehicle for conveying the visceral and psychological trauma of the Vietnam War. Poets including Bruce Weigl, Yusef Komunyakaa and W.S. Merwin have employed their art to give voice to the wounds individual and communal, subtly, intricately attending to trauma, disillusionment, and the effort to comprehend the madnesses witnessed.

The Vietnam War veteran Bruce Weigl channels the personal rage and lasting damage of war into poetry. In his book *The Circle of Hanh* (1995), Weigl contemplates the impact of war on the individual, examining his own alienation from the world that remains and his quest for meaning after the fighting is over. In Weigl's poem *For the Fallen*, the distance mentally travelled by soldiers after returning from war is exemplified when “the world” remains unchanged but in actuality, the soldiers have (Weigl 67). The persona in Weigl's poetry with its brilliant imagery and its stark intimacy - is someone who realizes that even as a soldier attempts to come “home” to his own culture, he thereby assumes the psyche's wounds of war.

The distinguished poet of the Vietnam War, Yusef Komunyakaa offers a singular depiction of the emotional and racial pressures of war. His most well-known volume, *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), is an intense narrative of warfare as seen through the eyes of one African American soldier. In poems like *Facing It*, about the speaker visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Komunyakaa brings us through the individual and collective pain of the war. This reflective attitude, combined with the way the speaker is staring at the reflection of himself on the black granite, serves as an image of the confrontation with traumatic memory and the process of integrating the past with the present (Komunyakaa 112). The stark, haunting imagery employed by Komunyakaa, and his interest in racial identity as well, illustrate the way the war wasn't just a battle between nations but was an intimate, internal war for the soldiers.

W.S. Merwin, who was not a veteran, writes from the perspective of someone who is too young to hail from the World War II generation and yet bears a tragic awareness of the broader implications of Vietnam, in terms of its moral and environmental toll. His book *The Lice* (1967) discusses the violence and existential doubts the war inspired in the poem *For the Anniversary of My Death*, especially in

tones of futility and darkness. Merwin's capacity to bring home both the devastations of the war and the internal emotional struggle has made it essential for our understanding of the psychological dimensions of the war (Merwin 56).

Alongside poetry, prose fiction has given some of the most compelling accounts of the effects of the Vietnam War by exploring more about what is, was like for soldiers and what was happening politically at the time and what happened after the war ended. Some of the most important of these works include *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O'Brien and *Dispatches* by Michael Herr (1977), both of which are regarded as seminal works related to the Vietnam War and its impact on the soldiers who fought in the war.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a series of linked short stories about a group of men fighting in the Vietnam War that draws on O'Brien's own experiences. The book is named for the physical and emotional baggage that soldiers lug around during the war, and O'Brien uses the metaphor of "carrying" to show how the soldiers are loaded down not just with gear, but with fears, memories and traumas. "The things they carried throughout the Vietnam War, psychologically and emotionally," have to do with the messiness of war, with fear, confusion, loss, guilt and all the "combat with themselves" they face at the time, she says. O'Brien, through fragmented and non-linear storytelling, mirrors as to how the soldiers are disoriented during and after the war. His novel presents the war's emotional toll, revealing that the physical journey through Vietnam is reflected through and parallel to an emotional journey (O'Brien 45). O'Brien's reflections on the ambiguity between truth and fiction also emphasize how tricky it is to blend together private and national narratives of war.

Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, widely regarded as some of the most powerful writing to come out of the Vietnam War, records an anarchic, hallucinatory experience of the war in which the lines between reality and disorder blur even further. Herr, who worked as a war correspondent, interweaves the memoir form with reportage, evoking the sensory overload, confusion and trauma that soldiers and journalists alike endured. The book is renowned for its searing, reportorial style, which dumps the reader right into the nightmare of the war, in all its brokenness. More specifically, Herr's portrayal of soldiers and their trauma as they became detached and emotionally hard summarizes the lasting emotional pains of war (Herr 123).

Herr's reporting is essential for comprehending the effects that war has on soldiers and civilians, but it offers a chilling example of the high price combat exacts from the human spirit. A very intimate viewpoint on the Vietnam War is offered by memoirs and autobiographies, which also shed light on how soldiers and veterans

dealt with their experiences. *What It Is Like to Go to War* (2011) by Karl Marlantes, a Vietnam War veteran, is a significant memoir in which the author considers the psychological effects of war and its aftermath. Marlantes' autobiography is a reflection on the psychological and moral effects of fighting as well as a personal story. He describes how the violence and moral difficulties of war impacted his mental health, drawing on his personal experiences as a Marine commander in Vietnam. Marlantes discusses the emotional strain that troops bear and the intense sense of isolation that comes with returning home in *What It Is Like to Go to War*. He highlights how soldiers frequently find it difficult to reintegrate into civilian life because they are unable to express their anguish and loneliness (Marlantes 56). Marlantes presents a personal viewpoint on the conflict as well as a more general analysis of the effects of war on soldiers worldwide by sharing his own experience.

Memoirs like as *What It Is Like to Go to War* are essential for comprehending the Vietnam War's lasting effects because they give veterans a forum to share their hardships and shed light on the psychological harm inflicted by fighting. These firsthand accounts provide a priceless viewpoint, illuminating the human cost of war and the challenge of readjusting to life after such a horrific event.

The Vietnam War has been richly and intricately portrayed in literature in all of its genres. While novels like *The Things They Carried* and *Dispatches* offer the soldier's perspective on the immediate and long-term impacts of war, poets like Bruce Weigl, Yusef Komunyakaa, and W.S. Merwin have conveyed the emotional and psychological agony of war. Memoirs like *What It Is Like to Go to War* provide firsthand recollections that shed light on the more profound psychological wounds that veterans bear. The Vietnam War is portrayed in these literary works as a profound human experience that has lasting resonance rather than merely as a historical occurrence.

The iconic Vietnam War novel, a landmark for its experimental combination with fiction, memoir, and metafiction, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien (1990) reveals the psychological and emotional toll of war. It is one of the most important novels ever written about the Vietnam War, serving as a soldiers' testament of one of the most bitter conflicts in our nation's history and the natural human givens that set the stage for that indignation. This content is concerned and interested in O'Brien's novel's cultural implications through fragmented storytelling, non-linear narrative techniques, and its deep engagement with memory and trauma in order to reveal the similar cultural sea change American literature experienced after the Vietnam War.

O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is not heir to a conventional, linear narrative. It's more a collection of interconnected narratives that dart about through

time and perspectives and storytelling forms. This broken form characterizes the postmodern writing coming after Vietnam. The fragmented style mirrors the confusion of the war and the fact that it is difficult to make sense of. O'Brien's combination of fact and fiction sometimes mixing the two represents the insanity and trauma of war, where memory and reality tend to overlap, if not blur altogether.

The title story, *The Things They Carried*, catalogues the physical and emotional baggage carried by soldiers in the Vietnam War. O'Brien itemizes not only known physical objects (weapons, gear) but less tangible emotional loads (fear, guilt, the burden of love). Reading Lists Reading lists are metaphor for the soldiers' psychological baggage, and the disjointed structure signifies that the soldiers can never leave war behind. "The anecdotal or fragmented narrative... not only mirrors the fractured nature of war, but also serves to suggest how deeply the men are trapped by memories they can't escape, even in the immediate aftermath of battle" (O'Brien 12).

Moreover, O'Brien often plays with the concept of unreliable narration. The novel's stories shift between different characters' viewpoints, and at times, the narrator himself questions the nature of truth. For example, O'Brien introduces the idea of "story-truth" versus "happening-truth," suggesting that while the facts of the war may be difficult to understand or convey, the emotional truth of the soldiers' experiences is more important. This narrative technique serves to emphasize that the war cannot be fully understood through traditional, factual storytelling, but rather through the emotional and psychological impact it had on the soldiers (O'Brien 179).

Thematic Exploration of Trauma and Memory

The Things They Carried is essentially a book that deals with the traumatic effects caused by the Vietnam War. The troops in O'Brien's stories carry their gear and they carry their trauma. Trauma, from wartime to postwar, hugely conditions the characters' lives. O'Brien's image of these psychic scars reflects patterns of trauma, both cultural and societal, that America experienced after the war.

O'Brien's work is also distilled around the theme of memory. Those in the novel often wrestle with the difficulty of retrieving their wartime experiences and integrating the war with their home lives. It is a book about how the characters are changed forever by things they did under fire long ago. In *Night Life* soldiers suffer from sleepless nights, when their enemies and surrounding conditions remind them of the traumas of the war (143). The characters' inability to separate themselves from these memories, as well as their fragmented human personas, reflects how the war forces people to live in a perpetual state of psychological disinvestment.

O'Brien employs Tim O'Brien (the soldier) as narrator and as a vehicle for collective emotional detachment by soldiers. The character's own encounters with his

memories and guilt illustrate the challenges of returning to a “normal” life after the war. It is the portions of the novel that are organized as fragmented memories and key traumatic events that reflect how the soldiers are stuck in a cycle of memory, imprisoned in the past and unable to alter the course going forward, of the trauma of war (O’Brien 56). The ongoing relapse into the past, material and psychological, is an expression of the overall post-Vietnam American condition. The war had broad implications not just for the soldiers who fought it, but for the national consciousness. By aligning the depiction of soldiers toting their traumas on the battlefield, O’Brien’s work implies that the war was a shared trauma as much as an individual one, one that affected as much those who fought it as the society that’d sent them to fight.

Literary and Cultural Impact

It played a part in a change in post-Vietnam American literature, how it treats memory and trauma, the experience of war. The book’s fragmented form and its foray into memory and trauma made it a touchstone for postmodern literature. The post-Vietnam literature was increasingly challenging traditional narration and representation and O’Brien with his pre-text/unaccepted narrative method was representative example of this change.

Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* tells the stories of a group of soldiers in the Vietnam War and the connection between the soldiers and their environment which seems to make their lives miserable. In the first narrative O’Brien enumerates both the material and immaterial things the soldiers carry, from rifles to the burdens of fear, guilt, internal injuries, and self-condemnation (O’Brien 2-6). This roster of things is representative of the mental burden the soldiers carry with themselves, and it lingers far after the war is ended. An important incident, visible to the readers, in which the burden of sin for the soldiers is demonstrated is when Ted Lavender falls dead from a sniper while he is urinating (O’Brien 13-16). And the way his death is recounted, so coldly, like just another day at the office, it’s an incredible illustration of the sort of emotional distance toward violence that soldiers develop. This emotional desensitization is also delved into when Lieutenant Jimmy Cross is described as holding himself responsible for Lavender’s death, convincing himself that he had caused it to happen by being too focused on Martha, whom he is in love with back in the world. Cross’s guilt is an important theme in the illusionist novel because it illustrates how individual anxiety, stress and shame have an impact on soldiers’ emotions, mindset and actions (O’Brien 16-18).

The novel also had a major impact in turning public sentiment against the Vietnam War. Through concentrating on the personal and the emotional, O’Brien was humanizing the soldiers, offering readers a chance to engage with the messiness of their lives in a manner traditional war literature hadn’t. *The Things They Carried* was

among the first significant literary works to explore the psychological burden of the war, undermining the simplistic, romantic tales that had preceded the Vietnam War literature.

The novel's treatment of themes of guilt and shame, and the difficulty of re-entering civilian life, struck a chord with veterans and their families but also helped shape a changing attitude toward the war among the broader public. O'Brien's description of the Vietnam War as a morally ambiguous and non-heroic war was perhaps an indication how the American public was feeling about the war. In such a manner, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* not only recorded the Vietnam War trauma but engaged in the country's continuing debate on the influence caused by the conflict and the ethical issues it posed (88).

O'Brien's vision of what the soldiers are going through is shaped by their trauma and memory. The soldiers' inability to sleep in "Night Life" symbolizes how the war infiltrates all areas of their lives, such as when they are not being shot at (O'Brien 133-143). The inability to find rest also serves as a metaphor for the soldiers' permanent psychological unrest. Also, in *The Man I Killed*, O'Brien thinks about the man he killed in the war; he explains the man his life might have led him to, O'Brien addresses this to help him deal with his strong guilt and the heavy emotions of taking a life (O'Brien 125-130). This is one of the examples of O'Brien merging memory with fiction to tell us about how soldiers cope with trauma. This psychological complexity is also reiterated in Good Form when O'Brien explains that he did not kill the man in the way he described but that the "emotional truth" of it is far more important than whether it actually happened that way (O'Brien 179-181), which emphasizes the contrast between "story-truth" and "happening-truth" in the novel. By these means, O'Brien implies that the emotional and psychological cost of war is often more significant than any factual explanation of the war.

With Kiowa dying at the end of *In the Field*, death becomes unavoidable and immediate for the soldiers as it does for Kiowa when he sinks into the swamp, the others desperately trying to save him but unable to (O'Brien 174-177). Kiowa's death symbolizes the randomness of death in war, and the sheer impossibility of mourning amid the chaos of combat. The soldiers' inability to mourn Kiowa properly given the attrition and all-consuming nature of war is an example of how soldiers are often forced to bottle up emotion and can never fully process loss. O'Brien's disjointed narrative in conjunction with his examination of memory, guilt, and trauma illustrates the profound and lasting psychological effect of the Vietnam War, where memory and reality blend together and soldiers remain haunted by their experiences long after they have ceased fighting. *The Things They Carried* is itself fragmented, disorienting, for, as we read through the stories, we gain increasingly penetrating insight into the

emotional and psychological chaos that is still battling within the soldiers long after they have left the Vietnam battlefield behind.

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien is one of the most frequently read and studied literary texts of the late 20th century, offering a meditation on war, memory, imagination, and the redemptive power of storytelling. Within its fragmented narrative structure, non-linear narrative and its concern with trauma, memory, and guilt, the novel represents the transformative period in American culture following the war. O'Brien's writing has influenced the postmodern literary era by moving away from traditional storytelling and focusing on the subjective and emotional aspects of the soldiers. Indeed, *The Things They Carried* was instrumental in redefining the national dialogue about the Vietnam War by pushing forth further inquiries into the war's integrity and what it did to the individual and the body politic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Vietnam War had been one of the most meaningful and controversial wars in 20th century, that changed political and social aspects of all country involved in very deep way. A war that was vicious, convoluted in its political intent and morally ambiguous produced wounds on those who served, and all too many left-over impacts on the noncombatants who suffered the fallout. We now understand that the war exacted a deep psychological and emotional toll which has largely been missing from previous war narratives but is integral for appreciating the overall cost of this protracted conflict. Decades of televised war coverage and unfiltered storytelling of trauma, guilt and memory meant that the Vietnam War fundamentally remodelled what we were to experience and expect as consequences of war at both the individual and societal level. Its aftermath left questions of morality, heroism and how human beings experience wars unresolved.

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