

# Interrogating Representation of Power Imbalance in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the power imbalance between the American soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers as portrayed in Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried. The research aims to investigate about the unparalleled military powers of American and Vietnamese soldiers as depicted in the novel. Meanwhile its purpose is to explore the causes of military defeat on the part of the most powerful American soldiers. Despite military supremacy of the Americans, they are compelled to lose the lives of numerous soldiers in the combat because of the negligent and poor leadership. Cross's recklessness leads the platoon to the defeat against the so-called powerless soldiers of Vietnam. The major finding is that technologies and resources cannot ensure the victory until and unless war strategies are functional and contextual as exemplified in the case of two imbalanced military powers: American soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers. Because of the effective strategies, Vietnamese soldiers do not lose much, while the supremacy as reflected in American arrogance is questioned because of terrible causalities. The research suggests that patriotism is acceptable but blind and hasty decisions lead people to massive defeats in life. The study has been based on interpretivism as a philosophical approach that inquires the meaning between the lines of the text.*

**Keywords:** American militarism, powerlessness, desperation, defeat, shame

## Introduction

This paper examines the status que of American soldiers engaged in hopeless wars, which neither provide them any solace of life nor do they ensure stability and peace in Vietnam as depicted in the novel. The representation of American soldiers and the common people of Vietnam implies that American warfare strategies have worsened their own status as numerous soldiers lose their lives because of careless leader, Cross. The paper unfolds the reality that American war strategies were ineffective and inconsequential. Resources, and technologies cannot ensure the war success as demonstrated in the power imbalance between America and Vietnam. Americans have had knowledge on history and culture of Vietnam. However, military leader, Cross has ignored. Consequently, the American soldiers have suffered a terrible loss of human soldiers. Powerlessness and abandonment—

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the primary situations of Vietnamese soldiers cannot prevent them from combatting courageously. Their prowess reflects in the casualties of American soldiers during the war. Leadership plays a significant role in the warfare as exemplified in the case of Cross who leads an American platoon but numerous colleagues have been killed. The loss of close friends forces him to realization that he should have considered Vietnamese culture and history. Besides, he should have been alert and engaged in formulating effective war strategies. His remorse on the blunders he has made symbolically conveys a message to the American government those undervaluing poor countries in terms of resource and technologies is both illogical and unethical.

### Methods and Materials

This paper has been based on both primary and secondary data. It has used Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* as the primary source of information and scholarly writings on the novel by critics and scholars have been employed as the secondary sources of data to contextualize the main argument of this paper. It is qualitative research as it focuses on feelings, opinions, ideas, perspectives and decisions of the fictional characters. Their interactions are the bases of interpretation. It has followed the deductive approach of reasoning and interpretivism is the main philosophical approach. The textual analysis has been the approach. Despite the underpinning of traumatic themes, the paper has not interpreted the novel from any particular theoretical framework, which indicates the limitation of the study.

### Literature Review

The studies on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* have demonstrated multiple aspects of the relationship between the United States of America and Vietnam. Ammar A. Aqeeli's reading of *The Things They Carried* set in Vietnam has implied that the novel has faced criticism for solely representing the harrowing and distressing experiences of American soldiers in the battlefield. Despite powerlessness of Vietnamese soldiers, they have harrowed and distressed American soldiers in the combat zone. The number of Vietnamese soldiers is small. However, they have been found resilient and mighty (20). The representation of the gap between the American soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers highlights the power imbalance as acclaimed in this paper. The portrayal of the devastating consequences of the war on America and its soldiers renders the novel an anti-war statement. Nevertheless, the depiction of the Vietnamese people strengthens its critical perspective against the war (Aqeeli 21). The US government generates adversaries to engage in warfare and ultimately to showcase and uphold its status as a global superpower. To counter this status quo of the United States of America, Vietnamese government needs to create additional propaganda to foster patriotism and to depict America as white, male, and superior in numerous ways. This wartime propaganda further dehumanizes the Vietnamese and constructs a skewed perception of their culture, resulting in numerous Americans viewing them all negatively.

The results of the conflict include mourning mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters on each side, along with the destruction of Vietnamese villages and their vital infrastructure as explored by Aqeeli (21—22). The conflict persistently worsens the relationship between the United States and Vietnam on the ground level.

Besides, Aqeeli states that the novelist illustrates that the political environment influences the characters' thoughts and actions. They represent the embodiment of imperialistic ideology, which promotes the belief in Western superiority and Eastern inferiority (25). The binary opposition between West and East as stated by the critic seems inappropriate as it cannot represent the eastern and western countries. The generalization is hasty. The power imbalance is explicit as the military strengths of the combating countries are unparalleled. Nevertheless, commitment and faith in their militarism and unwavering patriotism, Vietnamese soldiers boldly counter the American soldiers. Even their limited resources and technologies become instrumental in driving the enemies who are considered much powerful militarily and economically.

Sarah Bonney has stated that the moral framework of civilians is clear-cut, marked by strong and straightforward principles that determine what behavior is acceptable. Violent actions, such as murder and assault, are universally condemned and met with penalties like fines, imprisonment, or in some cases, capital punishment. Since a soldier's responsibilities involve committing acts that may be deemed immoral, this civilian moral code becomes irrelevant. Instead, taking the lives of others is considered morally justifiable, provided those individuals are classified as enemies. Contrary to claims from counterculture, soldiers indeed operate under an ethical code, as illustrated by Jimmy Cross's remorse over Lavender's death and his determination to improve as a military leader, aiming to "[perform] his duties firmly and without negligence" (*The Things They Carried* 24). The critic analyzes the violent actions as depicted. He condemns such heinous acts since they are punishable. The soldier's commitment and love for the national cause has obliged him to do and die.

Bonney highlights the ethical aspects that are ignored by the soldiers during the war as depicted in *The Things They Carried*. Nonetheless, their perception of ethics fluctuates, as their responsibilities inherently involve unethical actions. As a result, the soldiers are compelled to devise a new ethical framework that incorporates violence as a respectable means of honoring their duty, enabling them to experience enjoyment alongside violent acts. Unlike the enjoyment found in civilian existence, pleasure during wartime is no longer a reward for virtuous conduct or a consequence of ethical living. Rather, gratification becomes an emotional reaction to perceived advantages, such as heightened safety and control. In contrast to the notion that moral actions yield positive outcomes while immoral actions result in negative consequences, violence, which is deemed immoral within civilian ethics, provides significant rewards for the soldiers (1—2). Violence becomes a source of pleasure for the soldiers. When a soldier eliminates an enemy combatant, their sense of

safety increases, and they feel a heightened sense of control over their surroundings. The soldiers are compelled to create a new ethical framework that accommodates the violence now necessary for them.

The understanding of moral conduct shifts from a rigid set of behavioral norms that consistently denounce violence to the least harmful approach for resolving a conflict, permitting violence in certain situations. A war can be considered moral if it represents the most effective and least destructive means of resolving a conflict or eliminating a greater immorality. Due to the brutality of war and the opposition from counterculture, the concept of morality takes on a new significance in the novel leading to evolving interpretations of pleasure, ethics, violence, and warfare based on contextual influences. Nevertheless, the moral spectrum shaped by wartime experiences cannot be easily aligned with the binary moral framework of civilian life. Soldiers undergo a difficult adjustment, stripped of enjoyment, as they return to a once-familiar community that quickly feels estranged due to moral confusion and emotional isolation (8—9). Traumatic transference illustrates the feelings of fear and the sensation of powerlessness. When trauma strikes, the victim experiences complete helplessness:

Unable to defend herself, she calls out for help, but nobody responds to her cries. She feels completely deserted. The recollection of this incident continues to influence all her future relationships. The stronger the patient's emotional belief in her own powerlessness and abandonment, the more urgently she seeks an all-powerful rescuer. Frequently, she assigns this role to the therapist. This can lead to the development of highly idealized expectations of the therapist. The idealization of the therapist serves as a fantasy buffer for the patient against re-experiencing the fear associated with trauma. (Herman 137)

Powerlessness and abandonment are the situations of the Vietnamese soldiers. The traumatized minds need therapy to overcome fear that can be caused by the related perils. Naturally, the therapist cannot meet this demand for perfection, resulting in feelings of anger from the patient. For the patient, it is crucial that the therapist be flawless because she relies on this individual for her sense of safety. The role of therapist is significant as long as it can ensure relief and safety to the patient. Traumatic transference reflects the experience of terror and the experience of helplessness. When trauma occurs, the victim is completely helpless:

Unable to defend herself, she cries for help, but no one comes to her aid. She feels totally abandoned. The memory of this experience pervades all subsequent relationships. The greater the patient's emotional conviction of helplessness and abandonment, the more desperately she feels the need for an omnipotent rescuer. Often, she casts the therapist in this role. She may develop intensely idealized expectations of the therapist. The idealization of the therapist protects the patient, in fantasy, against reliving the terror of trauma. (Herman 137)

The therapist naturally cannot fulfil this need for perfection and this often causes anger with the patient. For the patient the therapist has to be perfect, because he or she depends on this person for his or her security.

### **Analysis**

This paper investigates the power imbalance between American and Vietnamese soldiers as depicted in the novel. Characters represent the soldiers of both America and Vietnam who are engaged in the ongoing war. Despite America's lack of understanding of the history and culture of Vietnam, O'Brien does not rule out the possibility that some Americans are eager to explore its land, its people and its customs. However, such eagerness is just as purposeless as the Vietnam War. Mary Anne's embrace of Vietnamese culture and her exploration of its human aspect have no meaning except that she is "still a kid" who is "naïve and immature" (94). Her fascination with Vietnam does not move her to challenge the war and the killing of the locals, but instead it serves to satisfy her curiosity and appetite for adventure. Ironically, she believes that Vietnamese people are "human beings ... [like] everybody else" (92) but she is passionately involved in a war that targets a land and people with whom she pretends to identify most highly. Tim states that Mary "wanted to get a feel for how people lived, what the smells and customs were" (91). Yet, she goes out all night long on ambush, carrying "the standard M-16 automatic assault rifle" (98). Although the characters are sensitive about the pains and implications of warfare situations, they are helpless to stop the war. Their desperation reflects in their empathy about the common people. They are represented in a way that they are opposite the Americans who are senseless and brutal as their plan is to just kill the enemies. The technologies and strong financial back-up of the American soldiers aggravate the status of the Vietnamese soldiers.

The stereotyping of the Vietnamese implies the dehumanization which is a project of American soldiers when combatting against the soldiers of Vietnam. More specifically, Mary is curious to understand how the locals "cook rice over a can of Sterno" and how they "eat with [their] hands" (91). Although Mary does not overtly perceive these customs as "primitive", her curiosity is reminiscent of those earlier orientalist who affirm their attitudes of Western superiority through investigating the "primitive" customs of the so-called Third World. To be a "superior" power means to be in control of inferior worlds. The superiority complex on the part of the Americans instills the seed of hatred for the easterners as exemplified in the case of locals of Vietnam.

Mary's desire to "swallow" the country and have it inside her shows the degree of the imperialist's desire to exert control and influence over the Far East. She explains, "Sometimes I want to eat this place. The whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to swallow it and have it there inside me" (106). Mary represents imperialists who seek to exploit the oriental people depicted as American soldiers. The allusion to the United States's

appetite for projecting its power overseas without thinking through the consequences of what war implies that desperate condition of Vietnamese soldiers in particular and the commoners in general. The implications of the war are horrible as atrocities against Vietnamese people exemplified in the case of their dead body parts by the Greenies who have become insane fighting in the war. Mary's loss of her mind signifies the United States's lack of moral justification for the war. It is the outcome of an unjust war and an aggression against innocent and powerless people. The power imbalance in terms of military power between America and Vietnam pervades in the novel.

The novelist highlights perpetrator's trauma that embodies the inactions of the men. Jimmy Cross, whose failures as a leader culminate in the death of Ted Lavender, exemplifies perpetrator's trauma, and the trauma acts as a transformative catalyst which propels him and the men to return to the military norm (*The Things They Carried* 24-26). Although the novelist uses the idea of perpetrator trauma sparingly, its effects are no less evident in the impact it has on the different characters. Perpetrator trauma is a transformative reaction to one's own actions. The novel employs a distinctive blend of fiction and reality to capture the complicated relationship between trauma and memory. The narrative clarifies through a series of interconnected stories, blurring the lines between fact and imagination. The writer's deliberate choice to recount certain events and omit others mirrors the fragmented nature of memory itself.

*The Thing They Carried* explores war, memory, creativity, and the healing strength of narrative. The narrative illustrates the soldiers of Alpha Company: Jimmy Cross, Henry Dobbins, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Norman Bowker, Kiowa, along with the novelist. Although there is hope that World War I leads to enduring peace, the novel depicts a reality where the impact of war seems long-tasting. The reiteration of the expression, "Another war to end all wars" highlights the feelings of hopelessness and despair that envelop the lives of soldiers who face the terrors of trench warfare. It further highlights the notion that war causes not just physical injuries but also inflicts profound psychological trauma, continuing a cycle of pain. The emphasis on the traumatic impact of the war as represented in the novel highlights the impairments embedded with the intents of war on the part of both countries, the United States of America and Vietnam. Savannah H. Khalil has investigated about the consequences of the war between these nations. Indirectly, the critic suggests that war is heinous and neither of the countries needs to stay contained in this trap.

Jenna Campbell Field underscores the significance of patriotism as represented in the novel. The novel flips the idealized perceptions of war to demonstrate how patriotism can lead to loneliness, the idea of duty can result in killing, and obeying orders can render soldiers unable to deal with their actions for survival (16). Humanity can go ignored when people become more patriotic than needed as exemplified in the case of American soldiers who blindly engage them in killing the soldiers of Vietnam. The war scenes reveal that soldiers have become senseless and irrational. Field further states that the novel is deeply



rooted in the soldier's experience, and it exalts the soldier. Nevertheless, the fictional work favors silence and obligation over personal health and well-being and explores coping mechanisms for trauma and guilt from being a perpetrator (16). By removing the societal norms that envelop a soldier during and after their return from combat, the novel implies how those norms contribute to diminishing significant connection and communication to a strict, military-oriented standard.

As the novelist illustrates, the soldiers cannot comprehend the environment around them. The two main instances of what ought to represent genuine relationships have transformed into mere memory and legend instead of being something significant and dynamic. In these moments, the writer emphasizes the importance of psychological resilience to handle the transformations of their reality, alongside the silence and solitude inflicted on the men during the war (19–20). The victims of the war need both patience and resilience to experience the consequences of the devilish war as depicted so far. 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 again in Vietnamese society.

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? (*The Things They Carried* 27). Due to bafflement created by war, Americans forget their purpose of being in Vietnam. They are like puppets played with by their political commanders from the United States of America. They appear fighting for their nation. In fact, their combat is against humanity. They represent the most powerful country of the world but fighting against the helpless soldiers of Vietnam who are far behind in weaponry and militarism compared to the Americans. This incompatibility confuses the American veterans.

To the novelist, 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. They overpower and overwhelm their brains with negativity as they loop in their minds over and over (Matthew 12). In the novel, shame and guilt recur and are often inextricable themes. Soldiers feel compelled to fight because fleeing may shame them, their families, and their communities. Besides embarrassment, there is 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 37). However, the American soldiers cannot run away because of patriotic arrogance. They have internalized that they cannot leave their enemies alive. Otherwise, their patriotism would be questioned and American supremacy would be suspected. 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.

This illustrates how the soldiers in Vietnam could never be prepared for death and how invisible their enemy was. Cross feels guilty for the death of Lavender, because he knows that he was not attentive during the mission. He was thinking of his girl Martha (*The Things They Carried* 10).

Because of American soldiers' arrogance in their military power, they never think that they would lose the war and their enemies would be left safe. This ego works as long as they are winning the battle in Vietnam. However, they get shocked at the demise of their colleagues in Vietnam as the Vietnamese soldiers strategically kill Americans. Consequently, Cross loses Lavender as he has become carefree during the mission. Lieutenant Cross does not open the secret of Martha's death. Instead, he pictures Martha's smooth young face, thinking he loves her more than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender is dead because he loves her so much and cannot stop thinking about her (*The Things They Carried* 7). Despite his intense feelings about Martha, Cross cannot protect her. He represents American masculine power. Cross feels shame. He hates himself because he has found most of his colleagues and beloveds including Lavender and Martha lost one by one. He realizes the loss which cannot be compensated. He cannot do anything except regretting on the mistakes he has committed by engaging in the war against the soldiers of Vietnam.

The loss of friends and beloveds can change the perspective of people as exemplified in the case of Cross who now feels responsible for not looking out for his platoon. His failed leadership has resulted in a terrible loss of soldiers. He is not strict enough and therefore he is not really a good leader. Even during action, he is preoccupied with the girl he is in love with. Another soldier under the command of Lieutenant Cross, Kiowa, dies because the platoon had set camp in a field, which turned out to be —the village toilet (*The Things They Carried* 145). The Vietnamese people's warning has not been taken seriously because of American arrogance. Meanwhile, Cross did not value the locals as he represents the most powerful country. This fixed mindset has blocked him from thinking in multiple ways. The narrator states:

But the rain kept getting worse. And by midnight the field turned into soup. [...] But the worst part', he would've said quietly, was the smell. Partly it was the river – a dead-fish smell – but it was something else, too. Finally, somebody figured it



out. What this was, it was a shit field. The village toilet. No indoor plumbing, right? So, they used the field. I mean, we were camped in a goddamn shit field. (*The Things They Carried* 145)

The images like soup, rain, smell reveal the bloodshed caused by the war. Meanwhile, the description in the narrative implies that desperate situation of American soldiers in foreign land. Instead of being able to defeat Vietnamese soldiers, they are portrayed to be in troubles and pains. Lieutenant Cross has been working under the invisible leadership. He follows the commands of the higher authorities. He could have protected Kiowa who has lost his life. Cross as a military leader has failed to save honor of American supremacy. The narrator against mentions:

Twenty-four years old and his heart wasn't in it. Military matters meant nothing to him. He did not care one way or the other about the war, and he had no desire to command, and even after all these months in the bush, all the days and nights, even the he did not know enough to keep his men out of a shit field. [...] He should've known. No excuses. [...] But it was a war, and he had his orders, (*The Things They Carried* 167)

Cross lacks knowledge on militarism. He has been leading American soldiers without any seriousness and he has almost been negligent about the consequences of wars. He has irrationally led the platoon. As a result, his soldiers have not been able to defeat the powerless Vietnamese soldiers. It is ironic as the American soldiers are generally considered to deserve victory. Instead, they are losing their lives. Sometimes, regret and apologies cannot compensate the demise of the innocent soldiers whose flaw was just to take orders and fight accordingly. Cross wants to apologize to Kiowa's father and write him a letter. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross feels something tighten inside him. In the letter to Kiowa's father, he apologizes point blank. He just admits to the blunders. He places the blame where it belongs (*The Things They Carried* 168). The civilian moral system is black-and-white with strong, simple standards to dictate acceptable behavior. Aggressive behavior, such as assault and murder, is consistently condemned and punished with fines, incarceration, and occasionally the death penalty. However, because a soldier's duty is comprised of immoral acts, this civilian moral code is no longer applicable. Instead, killing other human beings becomes morally upright, as long as those human beings are the enemy. In opposition to counterculture claims, the soldiers do not live without a code of ethics, as Jimmy Cross demonstrates by his guilt about Lavender's death and his commitment to be a better military leader who is ready to accomplish his responsibilities seriously. However, his letter cannot appease the anger and agony of people who have lost their relatives.

## Conclusion

The paper has explored that war strategies determine the victory. The will power of the Vietnamese soldiers despite having limited resources has empowered them to protect innocent people of Vietnam. By employing the textual analysis as a mode of analysis, the research paper has been written. The major finding of the study has been the defeat and loss of American soldiers despite their military supremacy. The world power America has to surrender before one of the powerless countries, Vietnam because the effective war plan of the latter. The hasty decisions by Cross have pushed the American soldiers to the mouth of death. A terrible loss that Americans have never thought about before comes to their court. The gorilla war strategy of the Vietnamese has protected their people. The paper concludes that guilt, remorse, and shame are the implications of the war waged for nothing. Eventually, American military leadership faces. However, Cross's regret does not ensure the compensation of great loss of American soldiers.

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