

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

Print ISSN: 2773-7829; e-ISSN: 2773-7837

eJournal Site: www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



Central Department of English
Tribhuvan University
Kirtipur, Nepal

URL: www.cdetu.edu.np

The 'Inevitable' Women: Studying Female Presence in War Spaces through Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

Barkha 

Department of English Language and Literature, Central University of Odisha, India

Article History: Submitted 15 Nov. 2022; Reviewed 30 Nov. 2022; Revised 4 Jan. 2023

Corresponding Author: Barkha, Email: barkhav98@gmail.com

Copyright 2023 © The Author(s). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s). The work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). www.cdetu.edu.np



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v5i1.52477>

Abstract

The literature of war exposes the gender binaries and stereotypes that are reinforced by war. The Vietnam War is one of the most popular wars in American history; it is the first war televised live. The reason for its popularity lies in its project of 're-masculinizing' America. With the Cold War and the Anti-War protests all over the country, America used the gender norms to justify the war. Of its multi-layered gender role enforcement, first it projects itself as the masculine 'saviour' who is going to fight for democracy and rights of a 'feminized' Asian country; second, its use of misogynistic slangs to create a homo-social bond among men and alienate women; but can the presence of women be omitted? In my paper I shall do a close textual analysis of *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien to show how he explores the female presence in the Vietnam War, as well as how the novel is a critique of the war literature of the time that attempts to reinforce the gender binaries.

Keywords: Vietnam War, war literature, homosociality, gender

Introduction

The literature about the Vietnam War is a prime site replicating the gender issues inherent in 1960s American society. War is often considered a field of men only, where women do not seem to belong, and gender issues seem irrelevant. In war fiction, the revelation of misogynistic and hostile attitudes towards women plays out even more explicitly. Philip K. Jason states, in these works of fiction, old stereotypes become more prominent, "women were once again and forever either mothers, wives, angels, whores or some painful combination" (126). This hostile attitude towards women is revealed through language; the metanarrative 'language' plays a vital role in creating and propagating these confined gender roles. Language plays both a power mechanism and coping mechanism in war literature; on the one hand, 'military slang' works as a coping mechanism for men in war as it functions to strengthen their bond; on the other, as a

power mechanism, it alienates the women and broadens the gender binaries. The politics of the Vietnam War lay in these gender binaries and it soon became a project of re-masculinization of America. Lorrie Smith points out that “in popular imagination, Vietnam War is seen as a site where white American manhood gets a chance to regain dominance in the social hierarchy” (qtd. in Farrell 1). It was a war for and against a third-world country; America, the self-claimed hero of democracy, projects itself as the masculine saviour of a feminized country. Andrew Wiest states, “...the Vietnam War changed America forever. After the great moral crusade of the Second World War, most Americans were convinced that their country could do no wrong. However, defeat in Vietnam and the attendant social discord of the 1960s forced a cathartic reappraisal of American society” (8); therefore, the Vietnam War became one of the most controversial wars fought by America as it shattered the collective [masculine] consciousness of the whole country.

O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is also among the many works on the Vietnam War which has been attacked for its inherent sexism. Smith argues O'Brien's text offers “no challenge to a discourse of war in which innocent American men are tragically wounded, and women are objectified, excluded, and silenced” (qtd. in Farrell 2). However, such a claim would be a misreading of the text; such misconception arises by mistaking the narrator, Tim, for the author O'Brien; the two are different figures though sharing a few traits as the genre of the novel is “Faction” [fact + fiction], and have to be treated differently. The author O'Brien should not be attacked based on the views of the narrator O'Brien. O'Brien was much conscious of the feminist discourse at the time and his writings, and his writings have a deeper meaning than that swimming on the surface.

Smith further writes that despite the claim that only those who were present in the war space could understand the events that were carried out, still, the male readers are more in a position to relate with the text and understand “the things men do” while the female readers seem out of place, alienated and put in the same position as the female characters like Martha and the Old woman who cannot understand “the things men do”. The language used to tell war stories forms a bond between the male characters and white male readers. There is a constant conflict between femininity and masculinity throughout the novel; they co-exist but not in harmony. The validation of masculinity lies in suppressing the feminine; the survival of men also relies upon the same, as evident in the very first chapter of the book, Jimmy Cross blames himself for the absurd death of Ted Lavender and later shifts the blame to Martha, who is physically not even present there; this reiterates the myth that it is necessary to get rid of all the feminine presence to survive the war. Philip K. Jason argues, “if one is compelled to destroy the woman and to destroy the enemy, it is likely that the categories of “woman” and “enemy” will become identified with one another” (126). Thus, Martha becomes the enemy despite her physical absence in the war space. From the perspective of the characters and narrator, one might blame Martha, but it would be a simplistic reading; from a larger vantage point, one might see that O'Brien, through this event, exhibits how, despite the war being represented as a field of men, women's presence is inevitable; they stay with the male participants either as their emotional baggage or in their pejorative slang that they use as coping mechanisms. O'Brien is trying to break the traditional idea that the ‘war space’ belongs to men and women cannot be a part of it; during the time, this idea was propagated and popularised by works like *Dispatches* (1977) by Michael Herr and “Why Men Love War” (1984) by William Broyles.

While Michael Herr uses a military lingo in this so-called ‘non-fiction’ book of new journalism to present himself as one of the soldiers to form a comradeship with his

male readers, William Broyles directly calls war the enduring condition of "man". He further says – ". . . men who didn't go to war but now have a sort of nostalgic longing for something they missed, some classic male experience, the way some women who didn't have children worry they missed something basic about being a woman, something they didn't value when they could have done it". This definition of the "classic experiences" of manhood and womanhood is conspicuously misogynistic. Broyles reinforces the stereotypical gender roles through war. In an interview with Martin Napstrick, O'Brien criticizes the aestheticization of war by Broyles as he says: "The guy who is narrating the story has my name and a lot of my characteristics, but it isn't really me, I never thought of felt that war's pretty, even though I can see how people like Bill Broyles have said that" (9). Thus, keeping this in the centre, I offer an analysis of the novel by separating the two identities, the narrator O'Brien and the author O'Brien; I shall call the author by his last name "O'Brien" and the narrator by his first name 'Tim'.

Gender Binaries and Victims of Patriarchy

War divides the world into two halves: feminine and masculine, but it is important to note that war is not something natural, it is man-made, and therefore, the binary created between these two worlds is also man-made. In the popular white American imagination, if war is one world, a world which belongs to men, then Martha, Linda, the old woman and the narrator's daughter all represent the other world, the non-war world belonging to a domestic space; they all stay back home, and cannot understand the events that occur in Vietnam. This dichotomy is taken further by both the incompetency of women to understand and comprehend the events that occurred to men in war and also by their inability to even listen to men. When Tim in "How to Tell a War Story" tells the old woman about the story of the medic Rat Kiley killing a water buffalo, he pictures "Rat Kiley's face, his grief" and thinks the woman to be a "dumb cooze" (76). The narrator would tell the readers that a war story is not just about men and violence, but it's also about "sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (77). This inability of women to listen, comprehend and understand in both war fiction and nonfiction is what Smith calls the preserver of "the absolute dichotomy of masculinity and femininity which perpetuate[s] a mystique of war that only male comrades can comprehend" (qtd. in Farrell 2). O'Brien is very much aware and critical of these dichotomies. The male characters that happen to use the insensitive, macho and misogynistic jargon are not supposed to be read as stock characters, but critically, even though O'Brien has chosen to make his narrator partly autobiographical by giving him his name, he does not make the narrator pass any critical remarks on any of the characters. O'Brien does not put his narrator, Tim, into an intellectually superior position as the author; rather, it is his genius that he makes the narrator one among the many young boys who "subscribe to patriarchal and condescending attitudes" (Farrell 3) during the war. Though these men subscribe to the white American myths of manhood, they are also victims of it; they are haunted by the power mechanisms of patriarchy that 'force' them to be a 'man'. Farrell calls the stories not "about men at war having to renounce the feminine. Rather, it is about the inevitable guilt associated with war deaths and what soldiers do with that guilt" (3). Jimmy Cross carries the guilt of the death of both Ted Lavender and Kiowa; however, what is interesting to note is the treatment of that guilt, to not carry the guilt with the other 'things they carried', Cross shifts the blame to Martha, for whom he had "dense crushing love" (19). It is further described: "He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men" (23). Farrell calls soldiers' relationship with women "largely products of their own imaginings and socialization" (11); Cross's relationship with Martha is also merely a part of his imagination that he

believes in faithfully. Even though to deal with his guilt, he shifts the blame to Martha, the biting irony of the situation is that it is Cross who is a subject of pity as he is the real victim of patriarchy who is a young man burdened with the task of being a 'man'.

Cross's burning of the picture of Martha after the shit field incident shows how men carry the emotional burden of war, trying to let it out through different means, trying to find meaning in the absurdity of war. His burning of the picture projects his helplessness, what Smith calls the attempts of a romantic and guilt-ridden young man to gain control over a situation in which he has very little power (qtd. in Farrell 4). Cross tries hard to fulfil his duty toward his men by determining just to follow the orders and dispensing love, yet Kiowa's death is inevitable. Both Kiowa and Ted Levendar's deaths show the absolute absurdity of war, where men have little to no control over things and events; Lee Strunk comes out safe of the risky tunnel business, while Ted dies in a blink doing ordinary business of everyday life. Kiowa dies, despite Cross's following the instructions; both deaths show war creating situations that men cannot control, while they hopelessly try to do so to prove their comradeship with the other men and to reassert their masculinity. The patriarchal narrative of being a "man" or being the "saviour" gives meaning to the useless war and their unrequired presence in a place which Mary Anne later says "they don't belong to". O'Brien's characters are realistic, representing the psyche of the then individuals, and one needs to see this in terms of realism instead of criticizing its presence.

The Homosocial Bond among Men in War

Homosociality is a non-romantic relationship between two persons of the same sex. In wars, this bond works as a coping mechanism for men, a sense of comradeship that makes the absurdity of war bearable. Since wars transport one from the civilised to the uncivilised world, they have the astonishing ability to create a stronger homosocial bond among men defying all the binaries created by the civilised world. The Vietnam War was one such war which, to a good extent, dissolved all boundaries like class, race and demography among men. In Wallace Terry's *Bloods* (1984), many black Americans narrate their experience in Vietnam, reminiscent of the time and space where there were no boundaries of colour, unlike the 'real world'. Not just the Vietnam War, but the significance of comradeship is evident in the classic American war novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895); based on the American Civil War, Stephen Crane's novel depicts the journey of a young boy to becoming a "war devil". After the first combat, "there were some handshakings and deep speeches with men whose features were familiar, but with whom the youth now felt the bonds of tied hearts" (Crane 37); here, the shared danger and heightened fear in combat make the bond among the soldiers strong despite their being completely unfamiliar to one another.

In *The Things They Carried*, the homosocial bond operates throughout the novel. The primary means to operate the bond is the metanarrative language. The military men share a language different from the 'ordinary world', often referred to as "military slang". This "military slang" leads to creating a stronger comradeship among the war participants as it alienates the rest of the world; even though it works as a coping mechanism for the veterans, it also works as a powerful mechanism to alienate women from the war space and confine them to their gender-assigned domestic roles. Susan Jeffords points out both pros and cons of this masculine bond: "though Vietnam narratives show a bonding of soldiers from diverse and often antagonist backgrounds, those bonds are always and already masculine. At no point are women included collectively" (85). I will study homosociality through the two stories in the novel "Love" and "How to Tell a War Story".

In the story "Love," we see the strong comradeship between the narrator, Tim and Captain Jimmy Cross, which stays the same even after the war. At the end of this story, Cross tells Tim not to "mention anything about ____"; O'Brien has left it blank on purpose; by not revealing Cross's secret even to the readers, he is making the homosocial bond between the two men impenetrable. In the same story, the readers also get to know one of the few important female characters of the novel, Martha. In the previous chapters of the novel, Martha is only seen through Cross's eyes. Still, in this chapter, she is not presented as a beautiful white woman who is a fantasy of a white soldier, but a Lutheran missionary and trained nurse who "had done service in Ethiopia and Guatemala and Mexico" through this information, the readers get to know that Martha is grown into a mature woman who "had never married and probably never would" (O'Brien, 33). Despite knowing of her achievements, Cross is not able to acknowledge her as a mature woman; he still keeps Martha's photograph with him, even in 1979, because in his imagination, she still is the same young high school girl playing volleyball in the photograph. In their post-war meeting, Cross tells Martha about his fantasy of tying "her to the bed and put his hand on her knee and just held it there all night long" (33). Martha, however, does not understand "how men could do those things" (33). O'Brien shows that post-war lack of understanding is mutual; Farrell compares Martha's missionary background, which requires self-sacrifice and hardship in a third-world country, to Cross's war experiences, "neither Martha nor Jimmy Cross pursues a more detailed understanding of the other's life" (6). O'Brien gives us the background of Martha, so as readers, we can understand she too had her hardships; she is not the white woman waiting back home, waiting for love or getting married. She, too, as Farrell puts it, had "things to carry, things that Cross cannot know any more than those who were not in Vietnam can comprehend the war experience" (7). Through Martha's achievements and independent decision of not getting married, O'Brien makes Martha equal to Cross.

Lemon Curt's sister is another female character about whom much information has not been given except for her being called a "dumb cooze" in "How to tell a War Story". O'Brien establishes that a true war story "is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behaviour" (63). Rat Kiley's letter to Lemon Curt's sister is the raw account of the war that a civilian is not prepared to hear; it distorts the heavenly glory of war and martyrdom by its disturbingly racist and misogynistic content. Lorrie Smith argues that this story, as it attempts to build a "deep compassion for the anguish and loss . . . men feel," does so by being "explicitly misogynist" and "ferociously reassert [ing]" traditional notions of manhood (qtd. in Farrell 7). In the letter, Rat uses excessively macho and racist language, for example, "stainless steel balls" and "just man against gook" (O'Brien 62); Rat does not realise that Curt's sister is not desensitized to violence the way they had been. His praise for Curt Lemon was for all the wrong reasons that must have seemed scary to Curt's sister. Rat tells her how her brother "made the war seem almost fun, always raising hell and lighting up villages and bringing smoke to bear every which way" (62); what seems fun to Rat Kiley must have petrified Curt's sister. Another incident that Rat mentions in the letter where Curt "went fishing with a whole damn crate of hand grenades... all that gore, about twenty zillion dead gook fish" (62). Rat moreover calls the "the funniest thing in world history" and writes to her that her brother "had the right attitude" (62). The narrator justifies everything men do, as it is a war story, and the uncivilised, lawless war space allows its participants to become as violent and inhuman as they wish. A true war story does not "restrain men from doing the things men have always done" (63). Tim calls it a "terrific letter, very touching personal" narrator Tim himself is not very different; he succumbs to similar racism, insensitivity and misogyny as Rat Kiley. The

readers are supposed to sympathize with Rat Kiley and forgive him for his sexist, racist, insensitive and misogynistic behaviour as he is nineteen years old, "it's too much for him," and "because his friend is dead" (63). However, Curt's sister never writes back, Rat did not expect that, and neither did the narrator. Rat calls her a "dumb cooze" for not understanding and writing back, but for readers, it is conspicuous why Curt's sister never wrote back. Rat insists in the letter that he and Curt are like "twins" and "they had a whole lot in common" (62). At the end of the letter, he tells her that "he'll look her up" (62) when the war ends, Rat does not realise that the contents of the letter could seem frightening and terrorizing to Curt's sister and there was nil chance of getting an answer to the letter. The narrator, Tim, calls it a "terrific letter, very touching personal", as he, too, is subject to the same desensitization as other men in the war. Farrell points out that Tim, too, is "damaged by his wartime experiences" and "subject to the same rage and hatred that many of his characters' exhibit" (8). At the end of "How to tell a True War Story," he uses the same word "dumb cooze" for the old woman who does not understand the narrator's story. The shared desensitization and misogynistic military lingo unite them as "brothers" and alienate women who cannot understand war stories, thus homosociality working as both a coping and power mechanism.

There is a clear distinction between O'Brien the author and O'Brien the narrator. The author does not endorse the gender resentment represented in the story. Rather, he explores the same: "There's a rage that goes through that story that was entirely intentional but didn't represent my rage necessarily, but the rage that could be the consequence of men doing all the fighting and women being excluded from it. Not a political rage," but a sense of "well, here we are in the war, and there they are back home." It's a rage I saw exemplified on a lot of occasions. . . . Exploring these issues is important to me, and even without having the lead characters be women, I can explore this" (qtd. in Farrell 9). O'Brien shows the readers both sides of the coin; through the chilling details of Rat's letter, he makes the reader sympathize with the sister who was not supposed to receive such spine-chilling information about his dead brother; on the other hand, through the narrator's remark on the situation the reader is bound to sympathize with Rat Kiley, who was too young to go through the mental and emotional trauma of death. The narrator says, "He's nineteen years old—it's too much for him—so he . . . says cooze, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back" (63). However, readers, as Farrell says, "are not supposed to sympathize with Rat here simply, but to see past him" O'Brien is trying to make a larger point about wars in general, that how war teaches men that "macho posturing and brutality are the norm" (8). O'Brien is not trying to justify the brutality of war. Still, he leaves it to his readers to judge whether such sexism and racism that seem natural in the regime of war are justified, given that they are not living in an ordinary civilised world. O'Brien's characters are in the middle of a war, where the general coping mechanisms of the civilised world fall short. Hence, they use obscenity to make war bearable and deal with their comrades' absurd and meaningless deaths:

They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. Greased, they'd say. Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They kicked corpses. They cut off thumbs. They talked grunt lingo. (O'Brien 26)

Morality and sensitivity in the field of war are almost impossible to find, the absurdity of war strips off all civilised ways of living and talking, and that is why it becomes difficult for the soldiers to return home and fit into the normal world again.

Women in War Spaces

Discussing gender issues in *The Things They Carried* is incomplete without Mary Anne. Mary Anne, an emblem of the traditional western stereotypes at the beginning of the story, a typical white American teen in her “white culottes and this sexy pink sweater” with her plastic cosmetic bag, “fresh out of Cleveland Heights Senior High” having “long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream” comes to Vietnam, goes through a complete metamorphosis and transgresses all her assigned gender roles. Mary Anne in ‘Sweetheart of the Song Tra bong’ is objectified before arriving the same way the “mama sans” that they were going to “pool” to “spice things up” (82); she comes in “helicopter along with the daily resupply shipment out of Chu Lai” (83). Her arrival with daily supplies and Rat’s description of the best thing about her being “fresh” (83) both show how men objectified her. However, after her arrival seeing that she fits into the picture of an ‘innocent’ white American woman, their narrative of her changes from a woman who is a sex object to an innocent girl. Her description later changes to “friendly,” “a bubbly personality, a happy smile,” “an attractive girl,” “the men genuinely liked her,” and “she was good for morale” (84). Mary Anne and Mark Fossie had been “sweethearts”. They were determined that “someday they would be married . . . grow old together, and no doubt die in each other's arms and be buried in the same walnut casket” (84). In Vietnam, they start practising this dream, “they set up house in one of the bunkers along the perimeter and “stuck together like a pair of high school steadies” (84), but Mary Anne was “no timid child” (84), the war and the land and its mystery “intrigued her” (85), she soon starts to take an interest in weaponry this way transgressing her assigned domestic role; sooner she begins transgressing the racist boundaries by spending time with the ARVNs, learning Vietnamese phrases and learning to eat with hands.

Mary Ann is the only female character present in the war space physically with the male soldiers. She, unlike the male American soldiers, does not subscribe to the racist norms; rather, she breaks them; she admires the South Vietnamese soldiers, Rat while telling the story, draws a distinction between the Vietnamese soldiers and the American soldiers; he calls the ARVNs “useless” (82), “While Rat reiterates American stereotypes of the South Vietnamese soldiers as lazy or cowardly, Mary Anne spends time with the ARVNs” (Farrell 12). Mary Anne wanted to visit the village of Tra bong to “get a feel for how people lived, what the smells and customs were.” Her attitude towards the Vietnamese people and culture was not racist, unlike that of the American soldiers. Mary Anne gets liberated through her exploration of Vietnam and her stay with the Green Berets, “the Green Berets or Special Forces were first organized as counterinsurgency specialists in the 1950's” (Farrell 13). O’Brien has given a clear distinction between the Green Berets and the medics; Farrell argues O’Brien hints towards the “tension between America's overt mission in Vietnam” to defy communist oppression and the “the covert, often grotesque and horrifying methods used” (13). Mary Anne could have never been liberated living among the medics; living with Mark Fossie and others could only lead her to conform to the myths of white American womanhood. Mary Anne goes through a transformation like every other soldier that came to Vietnam; she quickly discards the socially constructed gender attributes, she stopped wearing makeup or jewellery, cares less about hygiene, cut her short, “fell into the habits of the bush” and she learnt disassembling M-16 in the second week itself (87). Not just her physical appearance but

her personality changes too, "there was a new confidence in her voice, a new authority in the way she carried herself" (87). She grew precision of thought "not necessarily three kids, she'd say. Not necessarily a house on Lake Erie." She transgresses the submissive receptive role of a woman and takes the lead slowly.

Mary Anne's complete transformation later gives her complete liberation and authority over herself as well as the freedom to give her opinion assertively; she tells Mark Fossie and Rat Kiley that they were in a place where "they don't belong," which probably means that the Americans are not supposed to be in Vietnam. Mary Anne's desire to devour the whole place shows how a woman can be corrupted the same way as a man in the war zone,

I know it sounds far-out . . . but it's not like impossible or anything. . . . She was a girl, that's all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. All that crap about how if we had a pussy for president there wouldn't be no more wars. Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude. (106-107)

It is a story about transgression; it transgresses narrative, gender, racial, national boundaries and ethical boundaries. O'Brien through this story makes a point on how all these boundaries are constructed and can be transgressed, and he chooses a woman character for this task.

The story blurs the binaries and underscores the similarities between men and women. Through Mary Anne, O'Brien shows how women can be as violent as men: "Mary Ann, in Vietnam, not only fails to "civilize," but is herself seduced by the war" (Smiley 603). O'Brien, in an interview with Coffey, says, "is that what happened to me as a man in Vietnam could happen to a woman as well. And the reasons it didn't were reasons of sociology and demography, not a difference in spirit" (qtd. in Farrell 11). In another interview with Steven Kaplan in 1991, O'Brien further affirms that he sees both women and men as two sides of the same coin:

KAPLAN: Do you think there are differences between the way men and women react to situations of extreme stress?

O'BRIEN: I don't. I think that too much has been made of gender, way too much has been made of it, by both sides. Under situations of stress and in situations of incredible danger and trauma, women are capable, as men are, of great evil, of great good, and of all shades in between. What I am trying to show, what I am trying to open the door to, is the possibility that we aren't that different. We're different, yes, but we're not that different. We all experience anger. We experience lust. We experience terror. We experience curiosity and fascination for that which repels us. All of us. (qtd. in Weil)

'Sweetheart' is one of the most important stories in the novel as it is a repository containing almost all of the themes of the novel. O'Brien, throughout the novel, complicates the idea of truth and presents a dichotomy between fact and fiction. In 'Sweetheart', O'Brien complicates it even further by giving the story two narrators; previously, the readers get to know stories through Tim, who is established as a biased narrator subscribing to the same prejudices as the other soldiers in this story. It is established from the beginning that the story-teller Rat Kiley cannot be trusted; he had a "reputation for exaggeration and overstatement" (80); he revved up the facts, and among the soldiers, it was normal to "discount sixty or seventy percent of anything he had to say" (80). Through unreliable narrators and the amalgamation of fact and fiction in war narratives, O'Brien accentuates the idea that war stories can be fabricated too.

Conclusion

O'Brien's work presents the other side of the war; it successfully breaks the then scenario of war space belonging only to men and shows the undeniable and unavoidable presence of women in that space, be it through Mary Anne, who is physically present in the war space and transcends the set gender roles or Martha, whose presence is maintained throughout the war and even post-war. O'Brien propounds the idea that there is no binary between men and women; rather, they are two sides of the same coin; the alienation of women in the war spaces reinforces the false binary. O'Brien chooses a setting war, as "war destroys order, subverts higher processes such as reason and compassion, and returns us to instinct and our bodies. Such an explosive release allows men and women to be what they might have been without cultural restraints" (Smiley 605). War transports one from the civilised to the uncivilised space, where all the man-made labels are transgressed; O'Brien places both men and women in the war sphere and shows how the war and its violence take over them.

Works Cited

- Broyles, William Jr. "Why Men Love War." *Esquire*, 11 Nov. 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/news/a28718/why-men-love-war/>
- Crane, Stephen. *The Red Badge of Courage*. Bantam Classic, 1981.
- Farrell, Susan. "Tim O'Brien and Gender: A Defense of 'The Things They Carried.'" *CEA Critic*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1–21. www.jstor.org/stable/44377572
- Jason, Philp K. "Sexism and Racism in Vietnam War Fiction." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1990, pp. 125–137. www.jstor.org/stable/24780443
- Jefford, Susan. "Things Worth Dying for: Gender and the Ideology of Collectivity in Vietnam Representation." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 08, 1987-1988, pp. 79-103.
- Naparsteck, Martin, and Tim O'Brien. "An Interview with Tim O'Brien." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1–11. www.jstor.org/stable/1208335
- O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. HMH, 2009.
- Smiley, Pamela. "The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader in Tim O'Brien's 'The Things They Carried': Why Should Real Women Play?" *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2002, pp. 602–613. www.jstor.org/stable/25091896
- Weil, Joseph P. *Female Representations in Contemporary Postmodern War Novels of Spain and the United States: Women as Tools of Modern Catharsis in the works of Javier Cercas and Tim O'Brien*. Master's thesis, University of South Carolina, 2015.
- Wiest, Andrew. *The Vietnam War 1956-1975*. Routledge, 2003.

To cite this article [MLA style]:

Barkha. "The 'Inevitable' Women: Studying Female Presence in War Spaces through Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1, February 2023, pp. 53-61. *NepJOL*, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v5i1.52477>.