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Tim O'Brien's representation of the subjugated other's voice against war in *The Things They Carried*

Ammar A. Aqeeli

Ammar A. Aqeeli received his PhD in literature from Kent State University, USA. He currently works as an assistant professor at Jazan University in Saudi Arabia where he teaches poetry, fiction and ESL courses to undergraduate students. He previously taught English at intermediate and secondary levels in Saudi Arabia. He is the author of *The Nation of Islam and Black Consciousness: The Works of Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Other Writers* (2019). His research interests include 20th-century and contemporary American Literature, African American Literature, and Postcolonialism.

Abstract:
Tim O'Brien's Vietnam-based The Things They Carried *has been criticized for exclusively depicting the painful and traumatic experiences of the American soldiers in the war zone. Despite the limited number of Vietnamese characters in the novel, and despite their relegation to the role of powerless and voiceless onlookers, their presence shows the degree of the power imbalance between Vietnam and America. This article demonstrates how O'Brien infused sentiments in his stories to emphasize his opposition to the war and his concern for the dignity of the Vietnamese people. O'Brien asserts that the main purpose of the United States's invasion was to make Vietnam a learnable and controllable place. Through his critique of the United States's imperial ambitions in Vietnam, O'Brien provides a representative voice for the people of Vietnam to share their sufferings from an unjust war.*

Introduction

Most popular scholarly arguments on Tim O'Brien's representation of the Vietnam War in *The Things They Carried* (1990) revolve around the idea that the war had dire effects only on the US side. These critical assumptions concur that the stories in O'Brien's book are typical of many Vietnam War narratives written by Americans, which are characterized by a solipsistic language. In other words, O'Brien's novel is only preoccupied by the representation of the individual American soldier's consciousness, his pain and his suffering. Within these arguments is the assessment that O'Brien's work is engaged with ethnocentric solipsism. Such critical readings have led to the oversight of reading the book as an antiwar narrative concerned with the

subjugated other. While O'Brien's depiction of the horrific effects of the war on America and its soldiers makes his novel an anti-war narrative, his representation of the Vietnamese people enhances its oppositional voice to the war.

In *The Things They Carried* (1990), Tim O'Brien is both the narrator and the protagonist. However, to distinguish between the author and his narrative voice in this article, I refer to the real author as O'Brien and the narrator as Tim. In the novel, Tim describes both the tangible and intangible items that each soldier carries onto the battlefield. He notes that the soldiers carry basic items necessary for survival and intangible items such as fears and memory. The stories in O'Brien's collection reveal that his main character's objection to the war matures as the horrific scenes at the war front are unfolding. The narrator's initial opposition to the war shows his failure to understand and explain to his family and his hometown the purpose of the war. As "an ordinary kid," Tim's general perception of the war is based on his belief that it will take him away from the things that he loves and enjoys doing in "mainstream life" (1990, p. 48). However, as soon as he starts experiencing the horrific events of the war and realizes that he must kill other human beings, Tim has no choice but to conscientiously and morally object to it.

Tim portrays the war as fruitless and unsuccessful. He notes that the war is an "endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost" (1990, p. 14). His sentiments throughout the book show that he is against the war, which he depicts as endless and very destructive to both sides. However, he is afraid to take an overt antagonistic position against the war due to the social pressures against him. Instead of fleeing to Canada, Tim forces himself into the brave act, according to his country and his society, of participating in the war by imagining how others would think of him if he did not participate in it. He does not want to be considered a coward, so he submits to the pressures and agrees to participate in the war. Later on, he believes that his participation in it is wrong and futile.

The narrator in O'Brien's collection keenly provides a critique of US involvement in a war that is overcast by shadows and hints of the United States's political domination of powerless peoples of all colours around the world. According to O'Brien, the US government creates enemies to wage war against, and ultimately to demonstrate and maintain its role as a globe-spanning superpower. To do so, the government needs to produce more propaganda to promote patriotism and to portray an image of the United States as being white, male and superior on so many levels. This wartime propaganda also dehumanizes the Vietnamese and

creates a distorted image of their culture, which leads to many Americans seeing all of them in a negative light. The outcomes of the war are: grieving mothers, fathers, sons and daughters on both sides, and the devastation of Vietnamese villages and their life-sustaining infrastructure. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the human moral capacity in O'Brien's work, which provides a nuanced critique of the war's repercussions on the Vietnamese people.

Literature review

A number of critics have concluded that O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is more interested in portraying the American experience of the war more than the Vietnamese one. For instance, Jen Dunnaway argues that literary works about the Vietnam War perpetuate American ethnocentrism by "[reinforcing] the centrality of the white perspective . . . in the text" (2008, p. 117). Similarly, Renny Christopher claims that O'Brien's work is another American war narrative that puts the American perspective at the centre of its analysis. She suggests that O'Brien's novel fails to address the war's repercussions on the Vietnamese. Christopher notes: "[Only] the American side can or should be or needs to be examined … nothing else can be looked at. Thus, O'Brien's attempt to represent the other side fails" (1995, p. 231). Although O'Brien's stories include some Vietnamese characters and experiences, according to Christopher, they are only there to enhance the Euro-American mainstream perspective.

In contrast, other critics explored O'Brien's idea that the war is antithetical to anything human, moral or good. While it is true that all characters on the Vietnamese side are nameless and voiceless, which makes it irresistible to argue that the novel is a reflection of white ethnocentrism, their presence still exemplifies the unfairness of the Vietnam War. According to Stefania Ciocia, opposition to war is an unavoidable technique that a war narrative writer uses to appeal to the reader's interest and compassion (2012, p. 232). Similarly, Giorgio Mariani argues that war narratives can hardly avoid the "anti-war impulse" similar to the one found in *The Things They Carried.* According to Mariani, the absence of ethical usefulness in war literature "conflicts powerfully and unpredictably with the writer's need for a plot that will draw the reader's interest and attention" (as cited in Ciocia, 2012, p. 227). O'Brien consciously depicted the plight of the Vietnamese in his collection of stories to draw the reader's sympathy and attention, which he seemed to be struggling to avoid.

Despite the dilemma of indifferently killing other human beings versus maintaining moral integrity in the midst of war, which characterizes *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien successfully produced a narrative of moral interrogation of the Vietnam War. His novel is engaged with humanistic evaluation of the American war in Vietnam and of the immoral choices that his characters make. To do so, O'Brien must not conform to the conventions of traditional narratives of the Vietnam War, which according to Marilyn Wesley, emphasize "impossible ethical interrogation of the violence of Vietnam" (2011, p. 66). There are sentiments that O'Brien crafted in his stories not just to act as a strong voice against the war but to demonstrate a certain degree of concern for human values and dignity. O'Brien's inclusion of a number of instances that show kindness to and sympathy with the Vietnamese reveals his intention to include them as victims of an unjust war.

Imperialism and orientalism

Much of O'Brien's sympathy with the American soldiers in his book is central to his critique of the war as a manifestation of the United States's imperial ambition and ventures. In his seminal article "'I Feel Close to Myself': Solipsism and US Imperialism in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*", Michael Tavel Clarke argues that while O'Brien's novel seems to reinforce American ethnocentric and imperialist proclivities, it does in fact question American involvement in the war. He claims:

> [The] metafictional techniques of the book invite attention to the construction of the text, and that attention exposes a text guilty of many of the errors that the book diagnoses in its characters. These errors include a persistent silencing and displacement of the Vietnamese, an impulse to have Vietnamese characters and culture reflect and serve American interests and desires, and a diversion of attention from the horrors experienced by the Vietnamese to more trivial, ethnocentric preoccupations in a manner akin to psychological repression. The metafictional form of the text reflects the book's thematic interest in self-absorption, but it also represents the possibilities of a valuable self-interrogation. It is one thing to simply replicate, unselfconsciously, the problems of American ideology. It is another thing to do so in a thoughtful, self-critical way—the very thing that a self-reflexive metafictional form can accomplish. (2013, p. 147)

In other words, besides its huge danger to both the American soldiers and Vietnam, the war can be a field of an imperial adventure, where arrogant assessment of other races and cultures by a superior culture is perpetuated. By making the Americans characters central to his stories, O'Brien is in fact exposing and criticizing the American imperial ideology that is usually practised during wartime.

A number of stories in *The Things They Carried* demonstrate the narrator's inclination to oppose the war. "Church," for instance, questions the purpose of the US involvement in the war. In the story, Kiowa, a religious American soldier, resents his platoon's use of a religious site, a pagoda, as a military camp and base. According to the narrator, the pagoda was turned "into a little fortress, and then for the next seven or eight days" it was used "as a base of operations" (p. 1990, 113). Thus, Kiowa expresses his uneasiness of occupying a sacred site to his comrades: "You don't mess with churches" (1990, p. 113). His discomfort of turning what he calls a "church" into a military station stems from his belief as a religious man that places of worship must be respected as holy and peaceful sites. However, Kiowa's disapproval of setting up the camp is symbolic of the book's objection to invading a peaceful country symbolized by the pagoda. At the end of "Church", O'Brien declares the inappropriateness of invading Vietnam through Kiowa's reflection: "This is all wrong" (1990, p. 116).

Some characters in the book treat Vietnam as "an object of desire and derision" (Bhabha 1994, 96). In "Church", O'Brien, the writer, elevates his oppositional voice to the war by depicting the US army presence in Vietnam as an imperial mission. The occupation of the pagoda in the story symbolizes the invasion of Vietnam by a suppressive power. The American characters in the story demonstrate how this power is involved in imposing its worldview as well as perpetuating fantasies of domination and submission. However, such characters encourage readers to ask whether the story approves or disapproves of the US mission in Vietnam. Henry Dobbins's racist remarks against Kiowa and the Vietnamese monks are reminiscent of the condescending and racist attitudes of imperialism and its fantasies of the supremacy of its culture. He mocks Kiowa's Indian heritage: "An Indian preacher. Man, that's one I'd love to see. Feathers and buffalo robes." (1990, p. 116). He mimics the washing motion the monks make with their hands, and out of disrespect, he calls them "boys" (1990, 116-17). The story implies that the situation in the pagoda is just as wrong as gaining control over other nations.[1]

O’Brien’s oppositional sentiments towards the war resonate with Edward Said’s study of the relationship between orientalism and imperialism. O’Brien demonstrates that his characters’ thoughts and behaviours are shaped by politics. They are the epitome of the ideology of imperialism as a driving force behind ideas of the superiority of the West and the inferiority of the East. In other words, characters like Azar and Dobbins adopt what Said calls a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (*Orientalism*, 1970, p. 3). The orientalist perspective by American soldiers in “Style”, particularly by Azar, is a construct of imperialism, which allows them to misinterpret the Vietnamese culture. With this condescending view towards a weaker part of the world, comes the justification of dominating it politically.

The United States’s conception and practice of imperialism differs from European imperialism. European imperialism focused on conquering other nations and ruling them directly. As it claims to spread liberty and peace around the world, American imperialism, however, becomes involved in military interventions and control as a means of imposing policies that work best for America’s interests. Cultural discourse is not separate from American imperialist practices, which works in line with politics in managing its relationship with non-European or non-Western people. Such a relationship, according to Edward Said, is based on the assumption that America’s “destiny is to rule and lead the world” (1993, pp. 51-55). Azar represents American culture as one of the imperialist tools of dominating other cultures. Ironically, at the end of “Style”, Dobbins rebukes Azar for mocking the girl’s dance. This is can be interpreted as O’Brien’s disapproval of the US military intervention in Vietnam, as well as his disagreement with the way non-Western cultures are judged by the West.

O’Brien overtly portrays the image of the strange and unfamiliar Oriental Other in “Style”. Azar calls the dance of the traumatized Vietnamese girl “some weird ritual” (1990, p. 130). However, O’Brien employed this image as a tool to express his critique of the misunderstanding and misrepresenting of the Vietnamese culture. Such a portrayal echoes his earlier criticism of Americans’ support of the war in “On the Rainy River”. According to the narrator, the people of Worthington, Minnesota, neither understand the real purpose of the war nor do they know anything about the culture and history of Vietnam. He notes: “They didn’t know Bao Dai from the man in the moon. They didn’t know history. They didn’t know the first thing about Diem’s tyranny, or the nature of Vietnamese nationalism” (1990, p. 43). According

to Tim, the ignorance of his hometown locals about the political motives of the war and the soldiers' lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture demonstrate that the war is unjust, and it is a paradigm of the power imbalance between two worlds.

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, according to the narrator, 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 "naive and immature" (1990, p. 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" (1990, p. 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" (1990, p. 91). Yet, she goes out all night long on ambush, carrying "the standard M-16 automatic assault rifle" (1990, p. 98).

For O'Brien, the relationship between Mary Anne and Vietnam is reminiscent of the narrow perspective America and its mainstream culture usually have on other parts of the world. Her ignorance of the real purpose of the war and her indifference to its horrific effects on both American soldiers and locals echo the ones Tim demonstrates about his hometown people in "On the Rainy River". The level of blindness of both Mary and the people of Worthington to the meaning of the Vietnam War is the same. On the one hand, Tim's family and hometown seem to glorify the war with no consideration of its horrific effects on human life, particularly its immediate and deadly impact on children, women and old people. On the other hand, Mary finds in the war zone a ground for satisfying her craving for adventure and for exploring the Orient in a way that resonates with her emotional needs and the political aims of her country. Mary is intrigued by the novel world of Vietnam. Yet, she demonstrates eagerness to learn how to use weapons that threaten those whom she thinks of as human beings.

O'Brien criticizes the American mainstream culture as indifferent to other human cultures and customs due to its historical connection to orientalism. Although orientalism is interested in exploring and studying such cultures, it does so to bolster perspectives of a dominant culture supremacy. The mainstream culture represented by the locals in Worthington

does not need to establish human interactions with people of Asia because it is saturated with orientalist ideas that claim its cultural supremacy. Why should the people in Worthington question a war against a dark, exotic and potentially dangerous nation? The ideology of orientalism that infiltrated American mass media and other public arenas brainwashes Americans into believing that the "orient" poses a great threat to American values. Negative representations of Asians as exotic, unchristian, untrustworthy, dangerous and barbaric give no chance for average Americans but to think of the Vietnamese as less worth defending.

Mary Anne is the product of an ideology that is instilled in the minds of average Americans who think America has the right to practice control over some parts of the world because of its status as a superpower. This orientalist popular attitude started to take shape in the second half of the 20th century after the waning of Britain's power. In Douglas Little's words, O'Brien believes that Mary is an illustration of "American orientalism", which "had fused in the collective mind of America to generate a powerful mental map in which, predictably, the civilized powers – the United States and Western Europe – controlled a descending array of underdeveloped, even 'primitive' Asians, Latinos, Americans Indians ..." (2003, p. 10). Mary is intrigued by the great difference between the native world of Vietnam and the world of the Americans.

More specifically, she is curious to understand how the locals "cook rice over a can of Sterno" and how they "eat with [their] hands" (1990, p. 91). Although Mary does not overtly perceive these customs as "primitive", her curiosity is reminiscent of those earlier orientalists 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. In other words, Mary performs the function of orientalism, which attempts "to understand, in some cases, to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world" (Said, 1979, p. 12). From the first moment Mary steps onto Vietnamese soil, she is fascinated by how distinct the new culture is, and she decides to venture into exploring its mysteries despite her friends' warnings of the dangers ahead. Nevertheless, Mary ignores their advice, showing great confidence, courage and control to accomplish her mission.

Mary Anne vividly demonstrates both the orientalist and imperialist mind sets of the United States in its evaluation and treatment of the situation in Vietnam. Mary is confident and

seems to be totally in control while she is exploring the mysteries of the country through which her preconception about its uncivilized culture is solidified. In other words, Mary illustrates that the United States's plan is not to make Vietnam knowable but also governable. Her military and fighting skills make Vietnam a controllable place rather than a dangerous war zone. Mary is reminiscent of the United States's reliance on military power to intimidate and control people. She relies on her martial skills in guerilla warfare sometimes even without carrying any weapon. She joins the Green Berets, a special forces group that is impossible to mess around with as reported by Rat Kiley (1990, p. 103).

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" (1990, p. 106). This is a good allusion to the United States's appetite for projecting its power overseas without thinking through the consequences of what war would mean. The consequences are horrible: atrocities against Vietnamese people, such as the collection 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 also the outcome of an unjust war and an aggression against innocent and powerless people.

Mary's transformation from a sweetheart and innocent girl to a strong and fearless woman suggests a change in her role to an unfit one within the masculine culture on the battlefield. The one who loses the most from Mary's change is her boyfriend, Mark Fossie: "'Do something,' he whispered. 'I can't just let her go like that.' Rat listened for a time, then shook his head. 'Man, you must be deaf. She's already gone'" (1990, p. 206). Mary's loss of her femininity as observed by the soldiers is analogous to the United States's loss of its moral justification for the war. The justification of the war starts with moral and semi-innocent reasons on the grounds of achieving peace, freedom and self-determination of the people. Within such reasoning is a crazy ambition to control another part of the world just as Mary loses her mind and disappears in the jungle.

An unjust and immoral war against a repressed people

O'Brien's stories give representation to the underrepresented voices of Vietnamese people. His narrator reports their suffering at the hands of an unjust war by highlighting a number of

instances that epitomize O'Brien's recognition of the immorality of the war. O'Brien's experiences in the war inform him of its paradoxes. Tim understands that nations are sometimes "justified in using military force" to fight evil and immoral enemies such as "Hitler or some comparable evil" (1990, p. 41). Nevertheless, the Vietnam War proves to him the fallacy of his justification for war. For instance, in the story entitled "The Things They Carried", he reports the gruesome death of a Vietnamese teen. Instead of burying or covering his body, his "thumb" is amputated by Mitchell Sanders using "Kiowa's hunting hatchet" (1990, p. 12). According to O'Brien, the Vietnamese teen is a victim of a war that is morally justified back home, but the "moral" in the battlefield is a strange concept. Henry Dobbins and Sanders are confused by what the moral is:

> Henry Dobbins asked what
> the moral was.
> Moral?
> You know. *Moral*…
> Henry Dobbins thought
> about it
> Yeah, well, he finally said. I
> don't see no moral
> There it *is*, man. (1990, p. 13)

O'Brien italicized the word moral to emphasize the unfamiliarity of the concept to soldiers on the battlefield. In other words, its purpose is to show how far the soldiers have fallen and how intensely the war's atrocities impacted the Vietnamese side. For O'Brien, posing with a dead minor's body parts is morally repugnant.

O'Brien's stories serve as a moral testimony that is meant to evoke his readers' commiseration with those that the political propaganda machine identifies as "enemies" who are evil and sub-human. Some chapters in O'Brien's collection demonstrate his main character's involvement in a process of reflection against the political perpetuation of dichotomies, such as good/evil, civilized/barbaric, etc., during wartime. In "The Man I Killed", Tim perceives the Vietnamese soldier he kills as a normal citizen and a victim of the machines of politics. He notes: "The young man would not have wanted to be a soldier … He loved mathematics" (1990,

p. 121). As a war veteran and, foremost, a human being, O'Brien understands the extent of human suffering and pain experienced in wars.

The narrator of O'Brien's stories does not only share the sorrowful experience of the Vietnamese soldiers that he kills, he also empathizes with them and with the Vietnamese civilian victims of the war. Tim's ability to experience and feel the unspoken pain that the slain soldier has gone through drives him to assume that the soldier's past and present are identical to his. He notes that he and the soldier he kills are both in the army because of political pressure. Neither one wants to be in the army, nor do they want to take human life. Both want to be mathematics teachers or scholars. They want to have and lead normal lives, not to fight in a war that destroys their hopes and aspirations as humans. They want to go to school, get married, and have a happy family. According to Tim, the man left his life that he had built for years just to face his inevitable death:

> [He] had been a soldier for only a single day. After his years at the university, the man I killed returned with his new wife to the village of My Khe, where he enlisted as a common rifleman with the 48th Vietcong Battalion. He knew he would see a flash of light. He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village. (1990, p. 123)

However, whether the soldier wanted to be in the army or not, O'Brien's goal is to get his message across that the war is evil, and that people have a moral obligation to sympathize and empathize with its victims, and thus, to oppose it.

O'Brien continues to demonstrate the unjustness of the war and the immorality of killing people and destroying property through his implicit empathy for the Vietnamese victims. Earlier in "The Man I Killed", Tim's account of the Vietnamese soldier's killing is painted with mixed feelings of guilt and sorrow. Aroused by the suffering and misfortune of the Vietnamese young man, he is concerned not to call him an enemy or a soldier: "I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy" (1990, p. 126). However, in the following chapters, namely, "Ambush" and "Style", O'Brien's depiction of the unjustness of the war in Vietnam reveals his empathetic feeling towards the so-called enemies. In "Ambush", Tim mentions his nine-year-old daughter, Kathleen, and his inability to tell her the truth about the man he kills. In "Style", he narrates his encounter with a fourteen-year-old Vietnamese girl who lost all her family members. By introducing the Vietnamese girl in a chapter next to one where Kathleen is

remembered, O'Brien might see her as his daughter or as one of his sons mirrored in the Vietnamese girl.

The narrator tells his readers how to identify emotionally with the plight of the voiceless Vietnamese people in "Good Form". He speaks on behalf of them by emphasizing the enormity of killing another human being, no matter what his race or colour. In this section, Tim admits that most of his account is invented and never happened, including this one:

> I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present. But listen. Even that story is made up. (1990, p. 171)

The goal of O'Brien was not to create an accurate and truthful account of what happened in the war. His goal was to make us feel the horrific impact of the war on the least powerful beings. He states: "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth" (1990, p. 171). At the centre of "Good Form", Tim describes the horrific death of a Vietnamese man to illustrate his point and to highlight his sympathy with the people of Vietnam. Whether Tim kills the man or not, he believes it is not important to know.

However, what is important is recognizing that a human being is ferociously killed for no reason in a war without meaning. Earlier in the book, Tim asserts the meaningless aim of the Vietnam War for both sides. He reports that the war was an "endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost" (1990, p. 14). In fact, the losses and the impacts are more on the side of the powerless. Tim describes the outcomes of the American Soldiers' march: "They searched the villages … not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires …They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they called in artillery and watched the wreckage" (1990, p. 15). By implication, we are given to feel that the enemy is not found, and the purpose of the war is not so clear. The march was "for the sake of the march." (1990, p. 15). The purpose of the march turned from going after the so-called enemies into immoral practices against the peaceful residents and their properties. Telling or knowing the truth is as meaningless as the war because it does not matter as much as successfully fabricating a story that moves readers to reflect on how it feels to kill a

powerless human. What O'Brien's stories can do "is make things present". His stories can make his readers look at things they never looked at. They "can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God" (1990, p. 172). In "Good Form", O'Brien shares his sorrow of the plight of the locals in Vietnam and expects a similar reaction from his readers.

Conclusion

In *The Things They Carried* O'Brien does not only depict the dangerous and unpleasant experience of the American soldiers in the Vietnam War, he also addresses the plight of the Vietnamese people. There are sentiments that O'Brien infused in his stories to serve as a strong opposition to the war and to demonstrate his concern for the human dignity of the Vietnamese. O'Brien included a number of instances that demonstrate the narrator's sympathy with the local people of Vietnam. He intended to provide a representative voice for the Vietnamese victims and to report their sufferings incurred in an unjust war. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim and his colleagues do not understand the reason why they participate in the war. They cannot find a moral or logical justification for the war. O'Brien asserts that the war is unjust, and he believes that it is an instance of a power imbalance between two countries.

O'Brien questions the US government's rationale for participating in the Vietnam War. Its claim that Vietnam was a major threat to democracy and human rights was a mere excuse that was used to cover up the government's imperialistic intentions. Mary Anne's curiosity about the culture of Vietnam is a critique of mainstream America's misrepresentation of the Vietnamese culture as "strange" and "primitive". She is also a paradigm of the political propaganda machine in the United States, which labels the people of Vietnam as "enemies" who are evil and sub-human. She is juxtaposed with the political perpetuation of the civilized/barbaric dichotomy. Through Mary, O'Brien pinpoints the United States's imperial ambition, which is to make Vietnam a learnable and controllable place. Mary's martial skills and her obsession with guns make Vietnam a governable place rather than a dangerous war zone.

Endnotes

[1] Michael Tavel Clarke argues that the American soldier's occupation of a foreign dwelling exemplifies O'Brien's objection to the US mission in Vietnam. The soldiers' physical possession of the pagoda inevitably leads them to impose an American worldview. Kiowa calls the pagoda a "church". Nevertheless, Kiowa's use of the word "church", according to Clarke, serves "to clarify the wrongness of their situation" (2013, p. 136).

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Ammar A. Aqeeli
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Jazan University,
Al Maarefah Rd, Jazan
Gizan, Saudi Arabia
ammar383@live.com