

Analysis Of The Things They Carried By Tim O'Brien

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The topic of feminism seems too farfetched for a war novel, but this is not entirely the case in Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried*, where women play a crucial role in men's actions, although from a different perspective. Most epic movies depict the masculine nature of male figures who have a great appetite for battle. Yet, they always forget to identify the backbone in the form of women who offered inspiration and comfort to men during battles. Indeed, O'Brien's masterpiece is one that will stand the test of time, and this is clearly illustrated by the inner meanings of the book. Aspects of the feminist lens are brought to light mostly through characterization, objects of importance, and the role of women during the Vietnam War.

To best understand the theory of feminism in the normal, it is perhaps best to understand the feminist lens itself. According to the OWL Purdue, feminism refers to how cultural productions and any literature undermine or reinforce the political, social, economic, and psychological oppression of women. That said, feminism can be termed a political ideology or commitment that aims at driving out sexism of all forms. Many feminists tend to be on the opposing side, but they always have a common objective. These aspects of feminism affect "*The Things They Carried*" in a number of ways, mainly because it discusses gender roles as a theme. From the above presentation, it is evident that there is a positive and a negative side to the feminist lens. On a positive note, it advocates for equality and empowerment of women, while on a negative perspective, it addresses issues of inequality and oppression.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* not only demonstrates how the war was fought but also the effects of the same on everyone within and without the confines of the war. As much as a great part of "*The Things They Carried*" is centered on young men who fight for no cause at all, the author uses his capacity to place women in this context and depicts them as more than traditional stereotypes of young womanhood (Calloway, 252). Even in the male-dominated story of war, O'Brien illustrates that women, too, are affected by the slaughter of humanity's innocence. There are many scenes that illustrate innocence and courage at the same time, with one particular instance demonstrated in the section titled "The Dentist" by Mary Anne Bell, where she symbolizes the death of youth and innocence.

In this particular section, O'Brien introduces Mary Ann as a young and innocent female who doesn't know anything about the ongoing war. The author chooses to point out that the war had the capacity to cause unimaginable experiences and atrocities to anyone who got exposed. Onwards, the author

blurs all the stereotypical beliefs that people have about the sensibilities of women by depicting the young, lovely, and pretty girl as a virile and strong character like the men and sometimes even more. She begins as a naïveté, but as she progresses, she becomes much stronger and more knowledgeable and isn't afraid of the sight of blood. In fact, she goes ahead and becomes a medic and asks questions. Fossie and the others watch her as she transforms into an experienced soldier who now speaks differently and with lots of confidence, carries her body differently, and is full of self-assuredness. In just a flip of the first few pages, both the readers and those who knew her marveled at her transformation, which now matches the likes of (Greenies Farrell, 6). She converts into a soldier, a night watcher, and a night crawler with a necklace full of human tongues wrapped around her neck. Eventually, she disappears into the jungle and is absorbed into the war that led to her transformation. From a metaphorical perspective, Mary Ann represents the softest and gentlest lot that had been changed by the war.

Going forward, "The Things They Carried" depicts women as escapist fantasies who help the soldiers to escape from things that may torment them. For example, First Lieutenant Jimmie Cross carries with him letters sent to him by Martha everywhere he goes. He is almost sure that she is a virgin, and for this reason, he daydreams of having romantic trips with her. This fantasy helps to take his mind off the rigors of war around him (Wesley, 11). He is obsessed and only thinks of touching her knee while kissing her. After his friend dies, he gets rid of the pictures and letters to release the fantasy, but he carries a pebble with him. His friend, Henry Dobbins, on the other hand, wears his girlfriend's pantyhose on his neck for comfort and as a good charm despite being dumped by his girlfriend. When Jimmie finally meets with Martha, he realizes that she is a nurse who is not interested in dating his type of man (Kaplan, 44). From these illustrations we deduce that the good luck charms and letters are not meant to protect the soldiers, rather they are meant to protect the only parts they have left to love and show compassion.

Feminism is also illustrated in "The Things They Carried" by Tim's daughter, Kathleen, who is only three years of age. She calls her father on a cameo and asks him to tell her this story about a girl who won a jackpot of a million dollars and used the cash to purchase a Shetland pony. When she is nine years old, her father pretends to tell her war stories, but he fears that he doesn't want to destroy her child's innocence even as she grows (Smith, 30). Kathleen sees him to be weird. Onwards, Bob 'Rat Kiley' writes a long letter to the sister of a comrade who dies in the battle. Upon sending the letter, he never receives a reply from her, and this causes him to refer to her as 'cooze.' O'Brien, on the other hand, realizes that after telling his stories, only kindly older women appreciate his efforts despite the fact that they don't understand whatever he is saying (Silbergleid, 140). This also causes him to refer to them as "dumb cooze" and asserts that sisters never write back and women never listen.

Through his work, which is highly exaggerated, untrue, and has no end, O'Brien is able to offer a vivid picture in the minds of the readers of how the war affected the youth and exposed them to senseless venom. One enters the war sensitive, scared, naïve, and filled with ideals of a child on the edge of adulthood but leaves the war disappointed and disengaged from precious attributes of life such as pleasure, sensation, and innocence. Women are not exempted. In this setting, they are not just

bystanders waiting to cook and feed for the families. They are affected to the same degree as the soldiers (Smiley, 605). They become like the Greenies and even disappear into the jungles, deranged and homeless. They are physically visible but have a lot of dark memories that make the fragmented psyches unfathomable and impenetrable.

From the precedent, it is clear, as illustrated in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," that innocent women such as Mark Fossie's girlfriend, Mary Anne Bell, who were initially described to have bubbly characteristics and terrific legs, turned tough to an extent they participated in ambushes. She represented the gradual changes that had taken place in the minds of the innocent men who had taken part in the war. From a young girl who traipses into the war, putting on a sweater and a pair of culottes, Mary has transformed to become a toughened soldier despite Mark's warnings. She easily got cold and O'Brien writes that she would easily cradle her gun but was not in a pole position to cradle Mark's babies. The end of her initial innocence represents the events that changed the soldiers by stripping them of their innocence.

As Norman Bowker considers telling his ex-girlfriend, who had married someone else, about his experiences in the war, he stops after realizing that it is all sweet for her at home, as she may not understand or relate to the context of his stories. That said, "The Things They Carried" clearly illustrates the feminist theory and does even more to show that women have more response abilities than just cooking and sewing. If women had been absent in most wars, the battles would have probably been more difficult and hard to fight. Although men must showcase physical masculinity and courageous features in protecting women in their lives, they are also easy to break into the inside (O'Brien). A society that perceives women to be inferior when it comes to warrior matters is doomed to sexism. The truth of the matter is that without women to help men, there would be nothing and no one to fight for, as we would have already deteriorated from the face of the earth. That said, women in the war offered support to the soldiers by providing comfort, nursing services, love, and "manpower" to them so that they would easily overcome the havoc caused by the war. In truism, O'Brien uses the feminist lens to allow the reader to perceive women as the powerhouse that led to victory in the Vietnam War.

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