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Who Wears the Pants

The Unraveling of Gender in *The Things They Carried*

Zoë Meyer

In Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, gender roles shift during times of war from the traditional, American standard of men as providers and women as homemakers to both genders taking on the characteristics demanded by the situation, regardless of sex. As is common in American culture, men went off to fight while the women showed support by sending care packages and letters, but both genders were forced to abandon these stereotypes as the realities of war set in. Mary Anne, who entered Vietnam as a soldier's girlfriend, but left as a soldier herself, "made you think about those girls back home, how pure and innocent they all are, how they'll never understand any of this, not in a billion years" (108). The girls back home would never understand war and its effects because their gender roles and sense of identity were still intact. The soldiers initially tried to identify themselves based on these roles, but as their known culture became distorted, so did their sense of identity. Only those who experienced the realities of war could comprehend the ways in which the chaos could dirty one's understanding of who he was.

Many critics have discussed war's detrimental impact on the meaning of gender for the soldiers and everyone affected by the struggle in Vietnam. A cultural definition of gender makes up an important part of understanding one's identity. What it means to be a man is directly related to being the

opposite of society's definition of a woman, and vice versa. It is for this reason that the soldiers, as American literature professor Benjamin Mangrum pointed out, "[found] pleasure in feminizing the enemy" and used degrading feminine descriptions to depict anything contrary to the ideal of an American, male soldier (33). Men tried to sustain their masculinity and define themselves as men against feminine characteristics, but as women fought in the war also, there became less significance in being a man, causing the soldiers to recreate their definition of gender.

While the critical conversation focuses mostly on the concept of gender as the main identifier for a soldier, experts in sociology have looked at all the components and experiences that make up one's identity as a whole. Modern research, like that conducted by social scientists Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama, indicates that the "self is composed of multiple identities, and these notions of identity are culture bound" (163). Therefore, a shift in any one aspect of identity, like gender, which comes as a result of the changing culture of war, leads to a destabilization of understanding one's purpose and existence. Because conservative gender roles are so widely accepted in America, what it means to be a man—one's definition of gender—is a product of culture and directly correlates to being an American. Consequently, when a soldier loses his understanding of his gender, he loses his identity and sense as an American. *The Things They Carried* suggests that gender is a result of societal upbringing. The soldiers' concept of gender changed with the constant chaos of war, thus altering their understanding of what it meant to belong to a specific sex. Because gender correlated with other cultural aspects of identity, the deterioration of their understanding of gender in turn hindered the soldiers' ability to identify with their nationality. The meaning of war was lost as it became a place where one's entire identity shifted along with their ability to find purpose in fighting or function in society after the fact.

During peace, American society impressed clear and understood gender roles as part of the American identity. Gender played a huge part in determining how individuals participated in war and defended their title as Americans. During the Vietnam War, men defined themselves as producers and providers, while women identified as homemakers. Women in America traditionally stayed home while the men put on their stars and stripes and headed off to war when duty called. In her correspondence to Lieutenant Cross, Martha "never mentioned the war" (23). This was not because she did not care about his well-being and what he was doing as a soldier; she never asked about the

war because that was not her place. Their relationship contained a “separate-but-together quality” as demonstrated by the good-luck pebble she sent Cross from the Jersey shoreline—the place that separates the land and the water (7). Even though they stayed in touch, they could never be wholly together because she could not experience war in the same context. As a woman, she was expected to stay at home, hold down the front, and not get tied down in the intricacies and details of battle. Looking at perceptions of gender at this time, women studies professor Bren Ortega Murphy suggested that women “seemed to regard their wardrobes and marrying into money as their primary foci” (64). It was out of place and, consequently, un-American for a woman to take on the role of a man by being too involved with war. Her place was, instead, taking care of her home and family.

As the American sense of identity was largely based on following expected behaviors, those who did not follow the status quo of their role as women challenged American society and the accepted standards of gender. As professor Lorrie Smith indicated, the woman “who understands war too well . . . threaten[s] male hegemony and phallic power” (23). Men cannot feel like men if women do not act like women. Because gender and identity are created and understood within American culture, an understanding of gender and national identity shifts when put in the context of war culture.

War caused the culture among the American soldiers to shift, and as a result, expected behaviors and gender roles changed. Suddenly, men and women found themselves in a completely different atmosphere. The general absence of the opposite sex in times of war caused men to abandon their expected gender roles and take upon themselves the personas that needed to be filled. While appearing tough on the outside as they hauled heavy artillery and other essentials, the soldiers took special care to pack sentimental items, like Henry Dobbins carrying “his girlfriend’s pantyhose wrapped around his neck as a comforter” (O’Brien 9). The fact that the men carried around these items of romance and nostalgia shows they had an underlying feminine sentimentality that came out because of the war. After Kiowa’s death, a young soldier felt distraught because Kiowa had the only picture of his girlfriend when he died. The young boy felt “alone. He’d lost everything. He’d lost...his girlfriend’s picture” (164). This soldier tried desperately to retrieve that photo because without it, he felt like he would “lose himself” (164). The great lengths at which these soldiers went to keep alive the memory of loved females back home demonstrates how much their sense of manliness depended on a female counterpart. Unfortunately for them, the

female soldiers with them in Vietnam did not act or look like the females back home, and consequently, could do nothing to fill that void.

The women who went to war did not fulfill their typical gender roles, but rather, took on characteristics generally associated with men because of the intense circumstances of war. Mary Anne took on traits assumed to belong to men because she was in a heightened environment of war where courage and apathy mattered more than personal hygiene. It is evident how quickly gender roles disappeared by how “she quickly fell into the habits of the bush” (94). Mary Anne’s concept of gender and how she should behave came from the society she grew up in. America told her to dress cute, wash her hair, and marry young. But she was not in America anymore. The war did not care what gender she was, and spending her time on “cosmetics” and “fingernail filing” would not help America win (94). Instead, Mary Anne simply did what she needed to in order to survive in her new environment, and that meant taking on the role of a man. This new war culture forced the soldiers to abandon understood gender roles for ones that better suited their purpose in fighting. However, this did not only affect how the soldiers behaved, it changed the meaning of gender to them completely.

Because the distinct division between gender roles disappeared, belonging to a specific sex no longer had any significant meaning. Mark Fossie was the first to criticize the breaking of these barriers because Mary Anne, his girlfriend, was becoming more of a man than he was. He brought her to Vietnam in the first place to show her off as a trophy, claiming that in order to bring a girl to Vietnam, all you needed was a “pair of solid brass balls” (89). Mary Anne’s presence alone proved that Fossie was the only soldier man enough to get a girl there. However, when that notion and his conception of his gender became threatened by Mary Anne’s descent into brute masculinity, he could not handle it. He laid down the law by declaring, “there won’t be any more ambushes” (99). From that moment on, Fossie forced Mary Anne to wash her hair, wear skirts, and ask for his approval before speaking. All this happened as an attempt by Fossie to reassert his dominance over his girlfriend and prove to himself and the other soldiers that he was a man, trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to keep his understanding of gender from slipping away.

The soldiers’ preconceived notions of how gender defined them vanished in the chaos of war culture due to diminished gender roles. This took a huge toll on the soldiers because they could no longer identify themselves by belonging to a specific sex. As professor of Vietnam War literature Susan Farrell pointed out, they came to realize “gender . . . really operated according to agreed-upon

rules,” and not as an innate characteristic or function of their identity (11). This was the new understanding the soldiers had regarding gender: gender is a product of cultural circumstance, and therefore has no significance outside of that culture. These soldiers claimed to be men because that is how they functioned back home. But this was Vietnam, and they served a different purpose here—one where being a man did not mean what it did in America. Here, during war, even women could behave like men. This new definition of gender caused a deep identity crisis in the soldiers.

Changing the meaning of gender caused the soldiers to lose their understanding of their identity, leaving both genders lost and confused because they did not know what to make of themselves and their actions now that they no longer had a standard to compare themselves to. The men could not tell if they were being manly because women were roughing it on the battlefield the same as they were. Mary Anne could not make sense of her identity in Vietnam either. No matter how hard she tried, “she was lost inside herself” and eventually became physically lost when she went missing in action (110). The damages done to her sense of identity while at war were so great that she could not fathom going back home. She became nothing more than “part of the land” because she had no other means of identification (110). She had no concept of who she was as a woman because she was acting contrary to how she had been taught her whole life. Because gender was such a huge part of how these soldiers defined themselves while in Vietnam, the loss of that definition put a hole in their understanding of their identity. While recounting old war stories, Rat Kiley explains that the “only difference between Mary Anne and the men” was the fact that she’s a “girl,” which “didn’t amount to jack” because based on how they behaved, there was no profound distinction between her and the male soldiers (93). The one difference between Mary Anne and the men, their sex, was insignificant because there were no inherent differences between American men and women when they were in Vietnam. All disparity between genders is a product of circumstance and cultural upbringing. With no contrast between the way men and women behaved during war, belonging to a specific gender no longer had significance or meaning. Gender is connected to the way soldiers identified themselves, and losing their definition of what it meant to be a man hindered their ability to have an understanding of their identity.

Due to the fact that the soldiers’ understanding of what it meant to be American directly correlated to their understanding of gender, changing what it meant to be men altered their idea of what it meant to be citizens of the United

States. As American cultures professor Margaret Wood found, citizens “were encouraged to develop a sense of complete identification with the nation which surpassed all other forms of identity” (277). These men and women initially acted the way they did because that was how America told them to act. The men went to Vietnam to “kill and maybe die,” to fulfill a patriarchal obligation, while the women “belonged to another world,” as their presence overseas existed mostly in the form of correspondence to the soldiers (O’Brien 57,16). However, when O’Brien received his draft card, he contemplated running away to Canada were it not for “some irrational and powerful force . . . pushing [him] toward the war” (49). Cultural expectation pushed O’Brien to the war, but when that call came, rather than march proudly onward, “all [he] could do was cry” (54). With the deterioration of their understanding of gender came the depreciation of their American identity. Because these men and women in Vietnam were no longer fulfilling the same roles, their actions contradicted their understanding of patriotism. O’Brien could find no solace in fighting the war because he did not understand his role in it. War culture brought into question the authenticity of their national identity and belief of what it meant to be Americans. With the dichotomy between set gender roles and American principles, the soldiers found no significant meaning in being American and were at a loss for a sense of who they were.

Because the soldiers could no longer be identified by their gender or as patriotic Americans, they lost their understanding of the purpose of war. Originally, these boys accepted the call into the draft because they were “embarrassed not to” as they tried to fulfill gender roles and expectations society placed on them (57). They came to fight as men and as Americans to protect their country and their girlfriends, but no longer felt that purpose because their women were “there,” fighting in the action right along with them (108). Mary Anne was just as tough as any man in Vietnam, if not more. With that knowledge and realization, these soldiers stopped seeing war as a way to be heroes and men, and so lost the desire and purpose to fight in it. To the soldiers, war ceased to be the place to earn a medal of honor; instead, it became a place where identity dissolved. The longer they were in Vietnam, the further their understanding of identity faded. The soldiers lost their purpose and devotion to the war because they realized they would rather have stayed home where they understood and fit accepted standards.

Having lost their previous sense of identity and their purpose in fighting the war, these soldiers had difficulty functioning back in America where traditional

roles and definitions were so firmly established. Commenting on the mentality of a soldier returning home from war, O'Brien writes, "The war's over. You close your eyes. . . . and think, Christ, what's the point?" (79). Because the Vietnam War backfired in the minds of Americans, the soldiers lost their support from the public and their masculinity was reshaped even at home to the point where they could not identify as American men or function in society. They went to war to fulfill their duty as men, but after hearing nothing but disapproval for their actions from the general public, they realized their definition of masculinity contradicted America's. The soldiers no longer had any sense of belonging or understanding anywhere other than combat. The soldiers, especially Norman Bowker, came home feeling lost. "There's no place to go," he explains. "My life, I mean. It's almost like I got killed over in Nam" (150). Bowker hung himself three years later. The effects war had on its soldiers, as pointed out in *The Things They Carried*, revealed war as a place where men lost themselves amongst blurred concepts of identity and created the inability for them to function within a community either at home or abroad.

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