

War and Gender: A Deconstructive Reading of Tim O’Brien’s “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” (1990)

Guerre et genre : Une Lecture déconstructive de “ La Chérie de Song TraBong” de Tim O’Brien

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Abstract

War stories are strongly marked by the presence of the masculine soldier, relegating women and any feminine expression to the margins, particularly on the battlefield. Tim O’Brien’s “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” comes to challenge this representation by introducing a female character into the heart of the war experience; what, at first sight, might seem like a love story about a girl visiting her fiancé. Upon arrival in Vietnam, Mary Ann incarnates the archetype of a feminine character. Afterwards, she has, however, gradually changed; she stops wearing jewelry, cuts her hair short, and starts to use guns. Eventually, she joins the Green Berets and blends into the jungles. The profound mutation, which takes Mary Ann from a feminine icon to a bestial figure, then to a shadow, almost quasi mythic figure, disrupts the binary boundary between the masculine and feminine. While the soldiers are observing Mary Ann’s metamorphosis, they project it onto what war did to them; it corrupted their innocence and unleashed a part they hardly recognize of themselves: vulnerable, emotional, and human. So, this article will adopt a deconstructive method to perturb traditional gender roles and war narratives. It will likewise highlight that beneath the text lies multi-layered

inconsistencies that question the instability of the language system to subvert the rigid division of masculine and feminine, dominant war narratives, and the American history viewed as a founding metanarrative.

Keywords: Deconstruction- gender- Tim O'Brien- the Vietnam War

Resumé:

Les récits de guerre sont fortement marqués par la présence du soldat masculin, reléguant les femmes et toute expression de féminité à la marge, en particulier sur le champ de bataille. 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong' de Tim O'Brien remet en cause cette représentation en introduisant un personnage féminin au cœur même de l'expérience guerrière. Ce qui, à première vue, pourrait sembler être une histoire d'amour — celle d'une jeune fille rendant visite à son fiancé—prend rapidement une autre tournure. À son arrivée au Vietnam, Mary Ann incarne l'archétype du personnage féminin. Cependant, elle change progressivement : elle cesse de porter des bijoux, se coupe les cheveux courts et commence à manier des armes. Finalement, elle rejoint les Bêrets verts et disparaît dans la jungle. Cette transformation radicale, qui fait passer Mary Ann d'icône féminine à figure bestiale, puis à une ombre presque mythique, vient perturber la frontière binaire entre le masculin et le féminin. Tandis que les soldats observent la métamorphose de Mary Ann, ils y projettent leur propre expérience de la guerre : celle-ci a corrompu leur innocence et libéré une part d'eux-mêmes qu'ils reconnaissent à peine— vulnérable, émotionnelle, et profondément humaine. Cet article adoptera donc une méthode déconstructiviste afin de secouer les rôles de genre traditionnels et les récits de guerre dominants. Il mettra également en lumière les incohérences multiples sous-jacentes au texte, qui interrogent l'instabilité du langage et permettent de subvertir la division rigide entre masculin et féminin, les récits guerriers hégémoniques, ainsi que l'histoire américaine envisagée comme un métarécit fondateur.

Mots clés: Déconstruction- genre- Tim O'Brien- La guerre de Vietnam

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1. Introduction:

War stories are recognizably gendered narratives; they have always been defined by the presence of masculinity and manliness, implying several connotations: bravery, fight, violence, blood, guns, guerrillas, and action, and the absence of women whose image is socially constructed and revolves around household, weakness, and sentiments. From this perspective, women have long been excluded, and their role has not been associated with the battlefield. The Vietnamese narratives revolutionized this view and did not follow the traditional ways of representing war. In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong", Tim O'Brien challenges the stereotypical depiction of gender during wartime. The short story is about Mary Ann Bell, who goes to Vietnam to visit her boyfriend Mark Fossie. At the beginning, the character appears typically feminine as Rat Kiley, the narrator, describes her as:

This cute blonde—just a kid, just barely out of high school—she shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out to the boonies. I swear to God, man, she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater. There she is. (O'Brien 63)

At best, Rat said, she was seventeen years old, fresh out of Cleveland Heights Senior High. She had long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream. Very friendly, too. (O'Brien 65)

In the two passages, Mary Ann is depicted as an innocent, naïve, cute, and blonde; a prototypical representation of Western women, that might remind us of the representation of the women of Wellesley college who are solely indoctrinated and socially prepared for marriage in the *Mona Lisa Smile* movie (2003) or the submissive women in *The Stepford Wives* Movie (2004). It might likewise recall

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which deals with the prevalent image of the happy American suburban housewife and mother. Friedan similarly authored an essay in *Good Housekeeping* that discusses the reductive images of women in American Magazines (Guerin 223). However, upon arrival, Mary Ann is mesmerized by Vietnam and starts to learn the Vietnamese culture. Afterwards, she has been changing; she stops wearing jewelry, cuts her hair short, and can use guns. Eventually, she joins the Green Berets, wearing a necklace of tongues, and disappears into the jungles to become a shadow. The metamorphosis from a sweet, innocent, feminine girl to a bestial, very masculine character disrupts and displaces the binary feminine/masculine, which is deeply rooted in American/Western culture. By doing so, O'Brien manages to destabilize the notion of war and to criticize the outcome of the Vietnam War and all its implications on the characters. So, this work is a deconstructive reading of gender in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" to show the importance of gender in the representation of the Vietnam War and underline its role in redefining American history, and more importantly, in seizing the war experience.

2. Deconstruction and Feminism:

Of great antiquity, Western Philosophy has been built on the notion of universal absolute truth certifying the superiority and rightness of the White man, who, in a consistent matter, describes himself as reasonable and rational. This philosophy used language as its obedient servant, paving the way to the rise of logocentrism. 'Logocentrism' is the term Derrida employed in *Of Grammatology* (1976) to cover that form of rationalism which presupposes a presence such as an idea, an intention, a truth, a meaning, or a reference for which language acts as a subservient vehicle of expression (Rice and Waugh 182). 'Logocentrism' derives from the New Testament use of the term 'logos' (the Greek for 'word') denoting the Christian belief that the origin of all things was the spoken word of God: 'In the beginning was the word'. In logocentrism, the spoken word is thus closer to thought than the written word (Carter 110). Speech, thus, is favored than written

language. The opposition speech/written language turns out to be a case that lends itself to an entire binary system that calls for neither/or position.

The rigid law of logocentrism subsequently set out a notorious oppositional system within western culture; some dichotomies are soft and defined by each other such as light and darkness, while others such as: White vs. Black and Masculine vs. Feminine bear incalculable damage (Bertens 102), and introduce violent hierarchy, a label coined by Jacques Derrida, where one side is superior and privileged, and the other is inferior and condemned. Accordingly, the center is reserved for the white man, and the periphery/margin is the place of the black and women. Consequently, logocentrism perpetuated certain negative stereotypes about the periphery, leading straightforwardly to its victimization. The superior term belongs to the logos, reserving higher presence and visibility, and the inferior term marks a fall and is characterized by invisibility and absence.

Nevertheless, in the second half of the 20th century, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), the French Algerian born philosopher, criticized the red herring logocentric philosophy through destabilizing the long entrenched dichotomy system by introducing Deconstruction, a reading method, a practice of close reading, a form of analysis, or as he describes it as “une stratégie générale de déconstruction” (Culler 85), that changed how we perceive and interpret, for instance, literary discourses. He brought to the surface the tension between the center and the margin, arguing that: “In a traditional philosophical opposition, we do not have a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other, occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is, above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy” (qtd. in Culler 85). Here, Derrida explains how Western culture functions by creating a binary system where one part dominates the other, and the violent hierarchy needs to be reversed at one moment. The dismantling of the violent hierarchies requires discerning the hierarchy, proceeding to reverse it, and finally resisting the

installation of a new hierarchy by displacing the second side from a superiority position, too (Seldon 167). So, according to Derrida: "To de-construct is not to destroy; it is rather to unveil the seemingly hidden workings of language that constitute the very basis of linguistic and textual meaning" (Castle 2007, 81), and any attempt to claim that a text emits a single meaning is a will-o'-the-wisp.

It is worth saying that Derrida's practice of close reading of texts to unmask their inner contradiction to dismantle the center does not follow a given set of rules or footsteps of analysis. J.Hills Miller points out that every example of deconstruction differs from every other, making it easier to think of deconstruction as a method of reading rather than a set of rules or school of criticism (Womak, Robbins 29). Derrida just sheds light on how language is inherently unreliable; words are unstable in time. This revolutionary proposition questions texts that purport stable meaning. His method of reading revolve around how the language system works and how meaning in words is produced through difference. One believes that the meaning of the signified is pure, however, it is always contaminated. Hans Bertens illustrates this idea with an example of traffic lights; the meaning of red, amber, or green are known. When one sees each color apart, they believe that each one is independent and it never crosses their mind that they are not pure signs. In other words, when red is seen, people do not consciously think of amber and green; however, the two colors are present in red. The traffic lights form different structures; one of the structures is the green-amber that generates meaning in red color (97). Then, deconstruction's departure line is that language is by definition uncontrollable and more slippery than we realize; that each signified can have an infinite number of signifiers which leads Derrida to coin the term *deference* – in French *différance*— which is the combination of difference and deferral, and means that "meaning" is always deferred in time. Subsequently, the literary text becomes open to an infinite number of interpretations. Hereby, the reader turns out to be an important player in deconstructing the text and (re)creating new meanings that can be delivered to other readers for other meanings. The reader's significant role derives from

Derrida's famous statement "il n'y a pas de hors text" (there is nothing outside the text). This throws most of the burden of interpretation on the reader's shoulders; the meaning producer. Derrick Attridge provides another translation of the expression: "there is no outside text,"; implying no escape from narrative or textuality (Seldon et al 169).

The finish line in a deconstructive method is, after going through the identification of hierarchies and reversing them, to prove that neither of the sides is superior, and they are in a state of partnership; moving from neither/or position to both/and position. So, Deconstruction's *modus operandi* is the persisting questioning of the assumed binary system; ultimately offering a pluralistic view of the text, which, at least, sets the reader free from the constraints of the authoritative logocentric frame.

Other literary theories took advantage of the Derridean method and blueprint its way of analysis. Feminism is one of them; it is a subversive ideology used to undermine male authority and create an alternative power structure. Yet, Derrida did not support overt Feminism as he claimed: "I am not against feminism, but I am not simply for feminism" (qtd.in Elam 16). Jonathan Culler questioned the relation between Feminism and Deconstruction, arguing that numerous poststructuralists, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva, are feminists and vice versa. Deconstruction's rules of reading, like language is by definition uncontrollable, inspired feminists to invert the traditional hierarchy and assert the primacy of the feminine. It is worth saying that any method seeking to revert the sides and assign the center to the underprivileged side to become superior, and creating a new violent hierarchy, is called partial deconstruction. Feminism calls into question various concepts to overturn the male power structure that has been controlling women through gendered tasks for long time such as women's major roles are wives and mothers. For this reason, the opposition male/female is a violent hierarchy that requires deconstructive analysis.

First, before implementing gender deconstruction in our short story, one should understand its cultural construction and historical significance. Joan S. Scott (1986) thinks “gender” in its simplest usage; a synonym for “women”. Gender, within the scientific terminology of social science, is different from the one used in the politics of feminism. As a substitute for women, ‘Gender’ also implies information about men; studying women requires studying men (Scott 1056). The term gender embodies a multitude of definitions. It spread out during the early 1970s and was used to demarcate biological sex differences and how they become accustomed to be the source of informing social behaviors and competences, which decided what is ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. In *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* (2006), Kenneth Womack and Ruth Robbins define gender as a term denoting that femininity or masculinity notions are determined culturally to guarantee the endurance of the gendered identities ideology, and a particular status quo in society at large. Being defined against biological sex, gender constitutes, in much sociological and feminist studies, the guise under which being male and female behave socially, in an acceptable manner. Gendered roles range from clothes the person wears, to choices of leisure activities, and from career and education to tone of voice (45). Similarly, Jules Gill-Peterson (2001) believes that gender is a social and cultural construct that is distinct from biological sex. She admits that the term is recent and appeared in the second half of twentieth century. Prior to that, the word sex covers a wide range of categories somatic, psychic, and social through the use of terms, such as sex difference, the sexes, or sexual differentiation (Tompkins 2021). In sum, gender is intended primarily for the distinction between masculinity and femininity. This distinction is culturally and socially constructed and results into a gender order where the masculine is the favored norm and the feminine is the other. Feminists criticized these made-up differences and questioned the way the hierarchy is based on cultural assumptions rather than biological evidence. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir introduced her famous statement: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. To expound on the way feminists would dethrone the masculine and highlight the significance of the feminine in assigning

meaning to literary texts and other disciplines such as history, deconstruction seems to be the ideal means of achieving such a goal. The Vietnam War displays a rich material for the implementation of gender deconstruction because it contrasts well the binary masculine/feminine. Besides, it introduces multiple crises to the American myths and revolutionized the way one might look at history.

3. The Vietnam War: Redefining American History:

The Vietnam War serves as a redefinition of a lot of concepts and a firm playground for the implementation of Deconstruction and Feminism. War literature owns a powerful version of ratifying personal and gender identity in a given society. It simply reinforces the idea of manhood and underestimates women's role. However, not only did the Vietnam War redefine political, historical, and social concepts, but it also reconstructed and created a crisis for masculinity in American culture. The Vietnam narratives display a blatant destabilization of dichotomies that have defined for a long time the history of war and the history of the USA as well: enemy/friend, victory/loss, and truth/falsehood. They destroyed what Judith Feterly claims about the American fiction which "insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality is specifically male terms" (qtd.in Culler 51).

In "Writing About Vietnam: A Heavy Heart of Darkness Trip" (1980), Tobey C. Herzog explains that the Vietnam War is unlike any other war. True, the absurdities, irony, violence, and horror characteristic of previous wars are present in Vietnam. But, a great deal of the old experiences of prior wars are missing. The prominent images of this war are: rock music, drugs, body counts, helicopters, booby traps, lack of commitment, the absence of well-defined enemy, extensive media coverage and the unpopularity of the war on the home front (Herzog 682). The newly introduced images contrast with the very values of American metanarratives such as patriotism, heroism, spreading democracy, victory, and certainty. From the same vantage point, Frederic Jameson describes it as the first

terrible postmodern war; it inherits all the paradoxes of the era. By way of explanation, on the one hand, the postmodern character of the war derives from the logic of the postindustrial age or the late capitalist culture where technology pervades. It was largely a capitalist war just fought to protect American political and economic interests in Southeast Asia, and was a field of American high-tech exhibition. Strikingly surprising, on the other hand, the pushbutton and computerized war brought nothing but heavy losses and damage to the USA from 1968 to 1973.

Moreover, the contradictions revolving around the Vietnam War continue to create a crisis in the American History. It can safely be argued that it deconstructed views about the American metanarrative such as the myth of good and evil. In this regard, Cooke argues that postmodern wars are represented as breaking the binary structures of war/ peace, good/evil, friend/foe, victory/defeat, and reveal that “both gender and war are highly fluid and negotiable structures within which meanings are constantly constructed and deconstructed” (qtd. in Schott 21). O’Brien writes in *The Things They Carried*: “There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true[...] and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity” (82). The Vietnam War is characterized by uncertainties in terms of motivation, history, politics, and media coverage and literary representation. For instance, *The Things They Carried* (1990) questions the dichotomy courage/cowardice where Tim O’Brien writes: “I was a coward, I went to war” and successfully disturbs the reader’s mind about what constitutes courage. In the book, O’Brien narrates his story of draft to war:

I was drafted to fight a war I hated. I was 21 years old, young, yes, and politically naïve, but even so the American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong [...] certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons [...] the very facts were shrouded in uncertainty: was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression. (40-41)

In the passage, the writer puts at stake American grandnarratives that are used to morally justify the nation's political decisions and interventions in previous wars. He raises questions about what is right/wrong, certain/uncertain, and national liberation/aggression. O'Brien adds:

that there should be a law requiring those who support a war to go fight it – not send others who don't support it off to fight for them. If you support the war, he might say to the president, send your own sons there – or go there yourself. (42)

Then, from the above passages, O'Brien dismantles binaries that long stood at the heart of American culture. He not only blurs the line between the two sides of the binary system, but also he succeeds in inverting them: courage becomes relative and turns to be cowardice if you go and fight while cowardice acquires the sense of bravery when you flee the war. It is worth saying that courage is one of the features of masculinity and cowardice characterizes female's attitude, and by inverting the two features, the soldiers who went to war against their will and could not courageously express their opposition, they are merely cowards, or implicitly became females. So, the Vietnam War disrupts the American history and leads to its failure as Frances Fitzgerald explains in *Fire in the Lake* (1972):

America tried to play the role of Prospero in Vietnam, deluded into thinking that it could translate the untranslatable, name theunnameable, map the unmappable, control the uncontrollable all by falling into the trap of re-ification, that devilish habit of confusing human fiction with non humanreality(qtd. in Ringnalda 7)

Thus, confusion, uncertainty, and indeterminacy combine to make sense of the Vietnam War. Ironically, according to Western culture, confusion, uncertainty, indeterminacy, and loss are feminine characteristics. So, this war can be depicted

as feminine. Susan Jeffords confirms implicitly the importance of gender in the representation of the Vietnam War. She writes, that in the majority of the war representation, binaries do exist and can easily be seen how they divide masculinity and femininity, and that the soldiers, then, attempt to perform a variety of masculinities. In her article “Things Worth Dying for: Gender and the Ideology of Collectivity in Vietnam Representation”, she argues that the Vietnam narratives are emblematic of the operation of culture—the construction of gender. She elicits that it is through gender that Vietnam is being retold and appropriated into the American culture. Given American prohibitions, based largely on sexual difference, against women in combat, such exclusions take on the appearance of the “natural” rather than the social (Jeffords, “Things Worth Dying For” 85). In another article, entitled “Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male”, she explains implicitly how the Vietnam War in itself is feminine because the soldiers found themselves in a space of weakness, indeterminacy, indecisiveness, and dependence. Those identifying features remain characteristics traditionally perceived in American culture as feminine against which the masculine is defined (Jeffords, “Debriding Vietnam” 527).

Henceforth, one can say that there is a displacement of a system of knowledge about war, which is masculine. Then, Jeffords supplies an illustration with the Rambo movies to explain how the American culture has tried to fix and regain its image through the use of gender. The excessive masculinity in Rambo is not to reinforce the idea of manhood but an attempt to restore the nation’s image after a heavy loss. Accordingly, it can be said that gender is important because it gives meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge.

4. Deconstruction of Gender in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong”:

It is known that Derrida wrote important works on literature, such as of Jean Jacques Rousseau and James Joyce (Castle 2007, 82), and applied deconstruction to literary texts, such as Kafka’s short story “Before the Law”, and as it has previously been discussed that Derrida did not introduce theoretical precepts

guiding literary analysis. The sole asset readers rely on, is inferences, which start with the recognition that literature is one the most important discourses that embeds hierarchical oppositions; the guilty pleasure of deconstruction. "The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong" is replete with these oppositions.

In the war story, 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong', the presence of a female character's experience is involved in meaning making of that of the male characters i.e. the war narrative is taken for granted to be masculine, where the reader would never think that women would provide any meaning to the text; they would even think that female participation in the story is pointless.

"Sweetheart" challenges the held belief that military masculinity is natural, through the use of a 17-year-old girl who acquires a masculine military behavior on the battlefield. O'Brien uses gender to shape the soldiers' experience in Nam. As Milton J. Bates argues in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict & Storytelling*, America's experience of the war in Vietnam was shaped by its cultural conflicts, and the war's literature reiterates these conflicts, which are underlined by race, class, and sex.

Indeed, gender has become an important analytical tool in different disciplines due to the insight it gives into the cultural paradigms underlying representations: how texts perform gender, sex, or sexuality. As feminist critics and writers have shown, narrative not only consolidates gender but can be a strategic tool in dismantling its stereotypical representations. Gender is not only an integral part of everyone's identity, but also a category that structures cultural and critical discourses (Rosenthal 12). This Feminist view goes with the Derridean viewpoint, arguing that binary oppositions are less oppositional than they would seem. Within binary oppositions, we do not only find an oppositional relationship between the two terms involved, but we also find a strange complicity (Bertens 129).

Interestingly, Tim O'Brien puts into practice deconstruction. He debunks myths of rigid gender patterns during wartime. His representation of male characters does not follow the classification of Sara Ruddick, who discusses the many "masculinities of war". One such attitude she calls an assaultive misogynist masculinity, the soldier who is ready to rape and torture women. But there are other forms of masculinity created by war rituals and myths as well. There is the just warrior, restrained and self-sacrificing, protecting women and vulnerable people, and the conquering hero who serves the national glory (Rosenthal 24).

O'Brien does not adhere to the traditional way of representing male characters during wartime, for instance, Rat Kiley, the narrator of the short story, is an emotional guy and his friends are not depicted as masculine at all. Mark Fossie, Mary Ann Bell's boyfriend, is represented weak: "abruptly then, Fossie seemed to collapse. He squatted down, rocking on his heels, still clutching the flashlight. Just a boy—eighteen years old. Tall and blond. A gifted athlete. A nice kid, too, polite and good-hearted, although for the moment none of it seemed to be serving him well" (O'Brien 68)

The performance of masculinity according to traditional standards involving bravery, physical prowess, and virility is absent from the short story. The soldiers spend all the time in the camp, as Rat Kiley narrates, that except for a rare field inspection, there was no such thing as military discipline and most mornings were spent on the volleyball court. In the heat of midday, men would head for the shade, lazing away the long afternoons, and after sundown, there were movies, card games, and sometimes all-night drinking sessions. The portrayal of male characters in such action-free scenes indicates that they are indifferent, feel lost, and show no interest in the war's objectives, to kill the enemy and win. This female-like representation can merely be a way of resisting and questioning the very essence of war, characterized by action, excitement, and prowess. It is worth saying that gender is employed to reinforce the idea of resistance.

The feminine character of the soldiers is well graspable when it is contrasted with the character of Mary Ann Bell. When she arrives in Vietnam, she

is attractive, and the men genuinely like her. Out on the Volleyball court, she wears cut-off blue jeans and a black swimsuit top, which the guys appreciate, and in the evenings, she likes to dance to music. At this phase, Mary Ann incarnates the role of women as sexual subjects in Western culture, and her passive attitude resembles that of soldiers. However, Tim O'Brien de-genders Mary Ann and redefines American masculinity. Though she is young, Rat says, Mary Ann Bell is no timid child. She is curious about things, has a quick mind, and pays attention. In the following passage, the narrator sheds light on the contrast between Mark Fossie and Mary Ann. There is a reversal of roles: "The war intrigued her. The land, too, and the mystery. At the beginning of her second week she began pestering Mark Fossie to take her down to the village at the foot of the hill. In a quiet voice, very patiently, he tried to tell her that it was a bad idea, way too dangerous, but Mary Anne kept after him(O'Brien 67). As the passage explains, Mary Ann is obviously fearless and her fiancé behaves in a feminine way.

Furthermore, Mark Fossie tries, in vain, lots of times to stop her from swimming in the Song Tra Bong river, and to warn her about things like ambushes, snipers, and the stopping power of an AK-47. Rat admits that she isn't dumb and resembles them; the only difference is that she is a girl. She is not afraid to get her hands bloody because of the casualties, and does not back off from the ugly cases; she becomes a different person:

A good sharp mind, Rat said. True, she could be silly sometimes, but she picked up on things fast. At the end of the second week, when four casualties came in, Mary Anne wasn't afraid to get her hands bloody. At times, in fact, she seemed fascinated by it. Not the gore so much, but the adrenaline buzz that went with the job, that quick hot rush in your veins when the choppers settled down and you had to do things fast and right. No time for sorting through options, no thinking at all; you just stuck your hands in

and started plugging up holes. She was quiet and steady. She didn't back off from the ugly cases. Over the next day or two, as more casualties trickled in, she learned how to clip an artery and pump up a plastic splint and shoot in morphine. In times of action her face took on a sudden new composure, almost serene, the fuzzy blue eyes narrowing into a tight, intelligent focus. Mark Fossie would grin at this. He was proud, yes, but also amazed. A different person, it seemed, and he wasn't sure what to make of it. (O'Brien 68)

According to the passage, Mary Ann seems to be the only character feeling excited about the war and its atmosphere. She changes from a feminine into an active, cold, and masculine soldier-like who uses guns as Rat narrates:

Other things, too. The way she quickly fell into the habits of the bush. No cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry, cut her hair short and wrapped it in a dark green bandanna. Hygiene became a matter of small consequence. In her second week Eddie Diamond taught her how to disassemble an M-16, how the various parts worked, and from there it was a natural progression to learning how to use the weapon. (O'Brien 68)

The use of the weapon, in the passage, is so symbolic because the gun is both a literal and figurative symbol of manliness. By holding guns, Mary Ann becomes a representation of an ideal soldier as Farell notes: "at this point, the sweethearts exchanged gender roles...[as] the power in the relationship shifts from Mark Fossie to Mary Ann Bell"(qtd.in Vanderwees 195). The power shift structure sets Mary Ann free from any type of gender stereotypical restrictions. This idea is strongly reinforced in the use of the verb "gaze" in the narrative; when Mary arrives, "a cinch," Fossie said, and gazed down at his pretty girlfriend (O'Brien 66). The gender-producing gaze of the other determines every aspect of the susceptible individual, from identity to mannerisms and emotional disposition in a way that

makes of these individuals either men or women or even proto-feminists (Jefferson 103).

According to Nathalie Sarraute and Simone de Beauvoir, women are trapped in an inauthentically produced gender identity because they are the object of a gaze: that of men, each other's, and their own fantasized eyes of others (Jefferson 99). Sarraute believes that women's entrapment in a male gaze stems both from the way that the gaze imposes a certain image upon them. In the world of Sarraute's novels, everything is a matter of negotiating gazes. The question is how characters can guarantee immunity from the image projected by the gaze of the other. Successfully, at the end of the short story, after she has joined the Green Berets and after her entire change, Mary Ann challenges the gaze of Mark Fossie and "For a long while the girl gazed down at Fossie, almost blankly, and in the candlelight her face had the composure of someone perfectly at peace with herself" (O'Brien 75). At this very moment, the crossing is complete when the gaze is reversed; Mary Ann is free from any imposed restricted role. The gaze of the other is deconstructed in "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong", and it can be said that the war story breaks down the dichotomy between masculine and feminine.

In the end, Rat recognizes that masculinity is a mere performance, not only achieved by men:

What's so impossible about that? 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. (O'Brien 74)

In the passage, strange as it may seem, Rat ponders that there are no reasons women cannot exhibit masculine behavior and acknowledges that gendered roles

are a social construct. He is fully aware of the relativity of gender roles expands into an observation of an analogy between the soldiers' experience and that of Mary Ann. He tells his friends, "I'll tell you something: it didn't amount to Jack. I mean, when we first got here- all of us- we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we've learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne" (O'Brien 97). He adds: "what happened to her [Anne], Rat said, was what happened to all of them. You come over clean and you get dirty and then afterward it's never the same" (O'Brien 114). So, in the story, Vietnam corrupted the American soldiers' innocence, and this would not have been noticed without the metamorphosis of Mary Ann. De novo, the use of gender becomes key to reconstitute the meaning of war and history.

5. Conclusion:

To conclude, gender studies have always doubted the social, economic, and political roles imposed on women. They seek to bring women out of the circle besieging them with a certain mindset for centuries. Gender roles are still questionable even in contemporary societies, and especially in patriarchal communities. They remain a controversial issue as long as there is a dividing line between what men and women should and should not do. War narratives are a fertile ground for investigating the relationship between men and women, particularly that women have always been excluded from the battlefield, for it is believed to be purely masculine. While examining literary texts to unfold the inconsistencies of the patriarchal discourse, deconstruction remains one of the most powerful surgical methods of reading as it constantly searches for the unfathomable gaps in texts and fills them with new meaning. The deconstructive reading of 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong' reveals that the violent hierarchies related to gender are not stable. The introduction of Mary Ann, a female character, to a war story unsettles the masculine image of war. Through this character, gender rises as an insightful tool to look over American history/culture, to examine gender roles, and to understand human experience. In the end, as deconstruction resists any attempt to closure of text's meaning, meaning in 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra

Bong' remains malleable and open to ongoing exegeses that may underline other inner contractions of the narrative and may lead to the deconstruction of other opposition poles.

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