8.3.5 WT2 Sample 5 – Question 4 (The Things They Carried)

Outline

Prescribed question: “Which social groups are marginalised, excluded or silenced within the text?”

Part of the course to which this task relates: Part 3 – Literature: text and context

Title of text for analysis: The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien

Essay title: “Silence of the Oppressed: An Analysis of How the Vietnamese are Marginalized, Excluded, and Silenced Within The Things They Carried by Tim O’Brien”

Thesis: O’Brien marginalises and subdues the “allied” ARVN, as well as the rest of the Vietnamese people, with the effect on critical readers no longer viewing the U.S. soldiers as benefactors of the Vietnamese, but as an invading army, consisting of soldiers who are themselves, segregated.

My Critical Response will:

• Analyse how O’Brien marginalises the entire Vietnamese people as well as their soldiers in his novel.
• Examine how, even in non-violent environments, the US soldiers nevertheless silence those Vietnamese people
• Explore the nature of invading forces and their culture of silencing, affecting even their allies.
• Reflect on the importance of considering the multiple angles of a subject (a country) before approaching with a solution.

Word count: 994

Critical response

“Our Invisibility is the essence of our oppression” (Jean O’Leary). This quotations holds importance with the soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) fighting alongside the U.S soldiers in the Vietnam War, who were never given any recognition for their contribution. The metafictional novel, The Things They Carried, written by the Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien is a collection of short stories about the Vietnam War, specifically the ventures of the Alpha Company, which includes the character Tim O’Brien. Published in 1990, it received high praise and won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the French Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger (Washington Times). What is astounding is that, while the novel centres on the Vietnam War, there was never any comment from the Vietnamese on the novel. In other words, there was praise from the “colonists” (both U.S.A and France had invaded Vietnam) yet silence from the “colonized”. In his novel, O’Brien marginalises, silences, and excludes the Vietnamese with the effect on critical readers of no longer viewing the U.S soldiers as benefactors of the Vietnamese, but as an invading army.

The multiple social groups that make up Vietnam are not given a voice in this text. There are seldom moments where the readers are able to hear the exact words of a Vietnamese person. This is an authorial choice by O’Brien with the
purpose of highlighting the way the Americans treated the Vietnamese during the conflict. The lack of local contribution in the action of the book is significant and there are moments in which the silence and marginalization of the Vietnamese shines through. When the company tries to set up camp in a field used as a sewage grounds, or a “shit field” (O’Brien 138), a dozen “mama-sans” (138) try to warn the soldiers away claiming it to be “Number ten… Evil ground. Not a good spot for good GIs” (138). These small, broken phrases are not dialogue in the book but are paraphrased, as though what the “mama-sans” said wasn’t worth quoting directly. They are also characterised as simple rural people: unintelligent through confusing “Number ten” and “Number two” (colloquial for a bowel movement), superstitious through using the word “evil” and ineloquent through the last phrase where the word “good” is repeated twice in four words. Not only is the local populous painted in a negative light, but they are also treated like invasive wildlife when “Lieutenant Jimmy Cross has to get out his pistol and fire off a few rounds just to shoo them away” (138) and the word “shoo” is used, highlighting how the Vietnamese are portrayed as animals. Despite the genuine concerned efforts of the “mama-sans”, the company try and sleep that night in the “shit field”, and due to their dismissing local advice, Kiowa, a Native American soldier is killed. His racial background and history creates irony, considering Native Americans were (and in some cases are) treated in much the same way since the “New World” was colonized, and O’Brien is making the reader conscious of the fact that this muting of local inhabitants did not only occur in Vietnam.

In the only encounter with allied Vietnamese soldiers, they are ridiculed. They are momentarily featured in the medic, Rat Kiley’s, story about a medical camp north of the Song Tra Bong River in which “base security was provided by a mixed unit of RF’s, PF’s, and ARVN Infantry” (87). Readers are intrigued to finally hear about the people this war is meant to be “saving”. Tim O’Brien the character, however, disregards this opportunity to understand the population of the country he is defending, and derogatorily dismisses them, claiming that, “As soldiers, the ARVNs were useless, the Ruffs-and-Puffs were outright dangerous” (87). This derision of an Army Unit that in the duration of the war had a casualty list (killed and wounded) of 1,394,000 (Smith), blatantly indicates how the U.S. army entered the war to fight the enemy, rather than help their “ally”.

The novel has moments of relative peace and harmony with the Vietnamese population, but which nevertheless contains silencing and marginalization. In the chapter “Spin”, a local “poppa-san” (32) guides the company and prevents them from coming to harm for five days, which nurtured a bond, so it was “a sad scene when the chopper came to take [them] away” (32). Despite this affection, however, this passage still contains marginalisation in the playful yet derogatory rhyme they sang “Step out of line, hit a mine; follow the dink, you’re in pink.” (32). The other example is in the chapter “Church”, when the company camp in a local pagoda inhabited by “a pair of monks...tending a small garden and some broken shrines” (113). The silencing of Vietnamese culture is shown with the use of “Church” to describe a foreign religion, assuming it to be the same as the Western religions. The two monks living there never utter a single word in the chapter; they only clean Henry Dobbins’ weapon and make washing motions with their hands. The significance is that it reflects the involvement of the pro-U.S
Vietnamese in the war; used to help the U.S but never having their own voice.

This novel is a comment on how invading forces degrade those they may be “liberating”, in this case on the Vietnamese population. In every case the invaders, even with allies, will colonize, and their presence will be felt through silencing, marginalization or exclusion. O’Brien creates a mist of insignificance around the ARVN soldiers and marginalizes the local population, suggesting that saving the people of Vietnam from the “clutches of Communism” is not the actual motive for fighting. Even in situations of apparent peace and friendliness, the Vietnamese people are still marginalised and silence. It is no surprise that the silence from the Vietnamese people in *The Things They Carried* was paralleled by the real life silence of Vietnam in response to the novel. This novel raises an essential question, if a country aims to solve another’s problem, understanding and valuing its people is critical.

**Works cited**


Where should these things go in the new house? Listen and write a letter in each box. There is one example. mirror, A. table, sofa.

My bag. I carry my school things in it. My mum will be very angry with me. M Now, do you know where you lost it? Fch Well, I had it on the bus when I came home from school. Then I went to the park with some friends to play tennis. I left it there. M And what was in it? But the two months of gains would still pale in comparison to the approximately 22 million jobs that were lost in March and April. The number of Americans applying for initial unemployment benefits is estimated at 1.355 million compared to 1.4 million for the week ending June 20. Claims have pulled back from a record 6.86 million in late March. 3. Coronavirus Infections Increase, and States Shut Back Down. The mayor of New York also delayed the reopening of indoor dining, which had been slated for July 6. Day Ahead: 3 Things to Watch for July 2. 10. Comments (10).

What is the writer’s main purpose in writing the text? Ainsley Harriott.