Storied Matter: The Vietnamese Jungle as War Narrator in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

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Abstract: In American writer Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the "jungle" breaks away from the passive image of a silent material object. As it drives the development of the story, it reveals O'Brien's reflections on the trauma of war and his humanistic concern for both natural and spiritual ecology. From the perspective of material ecocriticism, the "jungle" transcends its role as merely an environmental backdrop, becoming a storied matter. Firstly, "jungle" exerts a powerful agency in creating and destroying life, shaping the psychological states of soldiers. Secondly, "jungle" has a profound meaning generation capacity; it serves also as a crucial material element through which the author explores war, memory, and reflects on human nature. Lastly, "jungle" becomes a text that transcends the limits of time and space, telling the historical trauma of human and nature.

Keywords: The Things They Carried, jungle, material ecocriticism, agency, meaning generation, narrative

1. Introduction

Tim O'Brien (1946-) is one of the most renowned American writers of the Vietnam War and has won the National Book Award and the James Fenimore Cooper Prize. O'Brien's fifth novel, *The Things They Carried*, was published in 1990. The novel is based on the author's own experiences in Vietnam War and consists of 22 interconnected short stories, each exploring the impact of war on both individuals and collectives from different perspectives. It serves as the author's memoir of his comrades and the time they spent together during the war. The stories in the novel can be divided into three categories: tales of soldiers in Alpha Company experiencing life and death in the jungles of Vietnam, stories about soldiers' lives before and after the war, reflecting on their time at home, and stories about healing from trauma. These three types of stories are interwoven, presenting to the reader the indelible historical trauma left on the soldiers of Alpha Company by their experiences in the Vietnam War.

Existing research on *The Things They Carried* mainly focuses on war trauma and its healing, as well as analyses of the female characters in the work. David R. Jarraway, through his analysis of the excrement and waste in the work, profoundly reflects on the senselessness and destructiveness of war, offering a harsh critique of it. Pamela Smiley argues that O'Brien's narrative attempts to bridge the gap between the experiences of men in war and women at home, fostering a deeper understanding and sympathy for the trauma caused to both sides by war. These studies are largely centered on the analysis of "human" experiences, often with an anthropocentric perspective. However, in recent years, the "turn to things" in literary studies has brought a new perspective. This approach emphasizes the narrative power of "things" and seeks to reshape the equal relationship between humans and things. Although there have been studies that interpret *The Things They Carried* from the narrative perspective of "thing", most of them focus on exploring the symbolic meanings and cultural repre-

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sentations of "man-made objects" (such as weapons, drugs, and everyday items). In contrast, the natural things that appear frequently in the novel, particularly the "jungle," have been relegated to the background of the story, with little attention or interpretation given to them.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable "turn to the material" trend in ecocriticism, which shifts the focus of literary studies from "things" as mere background to the central position of the narrative. This shift reminds us to rethink the relationship between humans and things under the influence of "anthropocentrism." Material ecocriticism argues that both human and non-human matter possess agency, acting as "nodes in a vast network of agencies" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1) that can be constructed into narratives or stories through reading and interpretation. In other words, all matter (both human and non-human) are "storied matter," possessing narrative powers. New materialism suggests that things (or matter) derive their agency from their relationship with human discourse, and these discourses, in turn, construct the relationship between humans and things. Specifically, the world is a material world, and humans and non-human matter exhibit their agency through their intrinsic processes of intra-action. The agency of matter, or the intra-action between matter and humans, is also the process of meaning generation: "matter's 'narrative' power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions." (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, x) In short, matter is not merely an inert existence; it actively participates in the creation of stories and meanings. If the perceptions of matter and its agency, and its meaning are the prime viewpoints, the concept of matter and narrative is the remarkable innovation of material ecocriticism based on the two assumptions. On one hand, material can generate meaning through its interaction with humans; on the other hand, material itself, as a text, can appear in the narrative with a transcendent stance, unbound by human discourse. Material ecocriticism asserts that "there is an implicit textuality in the becoming of material formations, and this textuality resides in the way the agentic dimension of matter expresses itself" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 6-7). This illustrates an important point of material ecocriticism: the process of material formation and transformation possesses characteristics similar to that of a text and can be "read" or interpreted. Accordingly, the "jungle" is not only an active story background but also a narrative text actively constructed by the material world, whose agency, meaning-making capacity, and cross-temporal trauma narrative ability need to be explored.

2. Jungle and Agency

New materialism "opens up a completely new non-anthropocentric research path by returning to things, refocusing on the long-marginalized and undervalued things, thereby fundamentally reshaping the relationship between humans and non-humans, the living and the non-living, subjects and objects." (Han 48) Therefore, a core argument of new materialism is that non-human matter is also an actor, possessing agency. These understandings of the agency of things remind us "to focus on how narratives represent the power of things, highlight their agency, especially the role of things in determining characters' actions and emotions, and even in constructing the aesthetic qualities of the narrative." For example, in Eudora Welty's *Death of a Traveling Salesman* (1936), it can be found that "the 'place' (including landscapes, things, and animals) is not simply a backdrop for character activity but plays a pivotal role in the narrative process of the novel" (Tang 100). Similarly, the Vietnamese jungle, in *The Things They Carried*, also a "place," becomes the protagonist of the non-human natural world in the text, driving the narrative forward.

The entire book is narrated around the Alpha Company soldiers, interspersed with the narrator's memories, experiences, and fictional events before and after the war. Although these stories focus on "people," from the title, structural arrangement, and content design of the novel, "things" cannot be overlooked. The place where the Alpha Company soldiers fought was the Vietnamese jungle, which, besides humans, was the most important participant in the war. It played a powerful role in creating and destroying life, and in influencing the soldiers' psychological states. The jungle, with its dense

rivers, overgrown shrubs, and swirling fog, was like an intricate chessboard, full of unknowns and dangers. On one hand, it provided soldiers with a secretive path for marching, and on the other hand, it could also become a place of ubiquitous danger. Every time the Alpha Company marched to a new place, they would survey the circumstance and dig foxholes for shelter during the night. The cover provided by the jungle allowed soldiers to experience the difficulty of survival in war, to the point where O'Brien, twenty years later, vividly remembered the scenes: "Digging foxholes. Slapping mosquitoes. The sun and the heat and the endless paddies. Even in the deep bush, where you could die in any number of ways" (O'Brien 1990, 32). If the jungle nurtured all things and provided soldiers with safe hiding places, making it an environment where natural life could exist, its destructive power was also a key manifestation of its agency. While Ted Lavender died from a bullet wound, it was the dense jungle that was the source of omnipresent danger. The Vietnamese soldier could not avoid the bomb due to the jungle's complex natural environment and lost his life; similarly, Curt Lemon, while playing catch, stepped on a detonator buried in the jungle and was blown to pieces. The jungle seemed to have magic that could control human actions and even decide life or death. Unlike the aforementioned deaths, Kiowa's death was not directly caused by human intervention, but rather by the immense suction of the shit field in the jungle. The jungle does not change because of human intrusion; rather, humans must act according to its demands, which fully demonstrates that the jungle is an actor with agency. Thus, agency "is not to be necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality, but it is a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 3).

Furthermore, the jungle constantly affects the psychological state of the soldiers. The unknown and unpredictable environmental factors of the jungle add extra psychological stress and fear to the soldiers, who are already weighed down by heavy burdens. The jungle's enclosed, dark, and humid environment continually challenges the soldiers' endurance and willpower, keeping them in a state of high tension and alertness: the soldiers cannot predict what will happen next, and the enemies, traps, and other dangers that may emerge from the jungle at any time keep them mentally on edge. The jungle is not just a physical space; it also interacts with the soldiers' mental states. The fear, loneliness, and pressure they experience in the jungle reflect their inner fragility and desire for survival. Every encounter, every shadow, every sound in the jungle could trigger their stress responses and psychological trauma. The constant pressure and sense of fear in this environment cause their psychological states to deteriorate, leading some to experience mental breakdowns. This interaction between the environment and the person forms a spatial dynamic that Stacy Alaimo refers to as "trans-corporeal space" (Alaimo 2008, 258), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of the body and the environment, indicating that our bodies are not isolated entities but constantly engage in dynamic interaction with the surrounding environment. Trans-corporeal space highlights the entanglement and interdependence between bodies. In this space, humans are no longer the sole subjects; non-human materials are no longer just sources of control, use, and consumption by humans. Although the jungle environment is full of danger and uncertainty, in certain situations, it also provides soldiers with a safe and stable place to rest, allowing them to experience a sense of tranquility and harmony, and a temporary escape from reality. The natural sounds of the jungle, such as bird songs and the sound of streams, can bring soldiers a sense of peace. These environmental sounds can help ease their tension and provide a brief psychological respite. O'Brien clearly remembers this feeling even twenty years after leaving the battlefield: "It happened, to me, nearly twenty years ago, and I still remember that trail junction and those giant trees and a soft dripping sound somewhere beyond the trees. I remember the smell of moss. Up in the canopy there were tiny white blossoms, but no sunlight at all" (O'Brien 1990, 67). The jungle may be filled with more unknowns and dangers at nights, but the darkness also provides soldiers with psychological comfort. At the same time, the nighttime jungle is devoid of the noise of the daytime, with the sounds of birds and other animals gradually fading away, leaving only natural tranquility. This peaceful environment helps the sol-

diers relax, momentarily forgetting the battles and tension of the day. At night, the soldiers can return to their hometowns in their dreams, reunite with their families, or enter a peaceful world, thus gaining psychological comfort and relief. As the narrator says: "it was a restful, unencumbered sensation…and so at night, not quite dreaming, they gave themselves over to lightness, they were carried, they were purely borne" (O'Brien 1990, 22). The two different psychological states and mental experiences brought by the jungle deeply reveal the complex impact of war on the soldiers' minds. The jungle is not only the setting for the war but also a projection of the soldiers' inner world. It can bring peace and harmony, becoming a psychological refuge where soldiers escape reality; at the same time, the dense, oppressive jungle environment can also signal unknown fear and intangible, ever-present danger, keeping the soldiers in a constant state of high mental alertness. These multilayered depictions of the jungle and the interaction with the soldiers' psychology make the jungle an extremely important material element in the novel. Therefore, the inherent interaction between humans and the environment, or between humans and things, precisely reflects the agency of matter. In other words, the agency of matter can be interpreted as "a form of narrative transmitted through the interchanges of organic and inorganic matter, the continuity of human and nonhuman forces, and the interplay of bodily natures, all forming active composites" (Oppermann 2014, 21).

3. Jungle and Meaning

Material ecocriticism posits that matter "has the potential to initiate meanings and participate in semiotic processes" (Maran 2014, 142). The meaning generation of matter is not constructed through human discourse, but rather the material world itself "is full of images, symbols, meanings, and intentions, and people need to analyze a particular matter and its relationship with the environment in order to form a discourse-based understanding of it" (Tang 117). The material ecocritical understanding of matter and discourse challenges the binary oppositions found in traditional Western ideologies, urging us to reconsider the relationships between humans and things, as well as between humans and nature. Natural matter influences human behavior through their performance, which is also the process of meaning generation. For instance, in nature, signs of drought can trigger changes in the behavior of both humans and plants and animals, and by inspiring humans to create myths, art, and other forms of literature, they help shape human culture, which is a product of the meaning generation process of matter. In *The Things They Carried*, when we look at the jungle as a natural material, it is not only the battleground of the war but can also be considered a synonym for "war" itself.

As previously mentioned, the jungle mercilessly devours those who do not adhere to the "rules of the jungle," much like the war itself. Wherever it goes, nothing survives, and despair pervades. The true war stories that O'Brien recounts are all descriptions of the jungle environment at the time, stories about the love, friendship, and familial bonds among soldiers in the jungle: "And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (O'Brien 1990, 81). The jungle is like a vast war machine, and the various smells and sounds within it function as parts of that machine, constantly influencing the soldiers' actions while also holding unique narrative significance. Firstly, the narrator's writing of smells progresses alongside the course of the war. When the soldiers first enter the jungle, they smell "fog," "the smell of moss," "the smell of deep greenery." However, when Ted Lavender dies in the jungle and Mary Ann enters the jungle, gradually transformed by its war environment, the smells shift from fresh to foul: "a topmost scent of joss sticks and incense," "a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement", and "the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh" (O'Brien 1990, 104-105). As comrades die one after another, the descriptions of smell become more intense, such as the smell of burning straw, decayed fish and shrimp in the river, the stench of blood and flesh, and disinfectant.

As a sensory element, smell concretely enhances the reader's perception of the environment. The putrid smell allows readers to sense the filth of the jungle and the atmosphere of death, which elicits a stronger emotional reaction than mere visual or auditory descriptions. More importantly, the descriptions of smell not only indicate the soldiers' transition from initial ignorance and naivety to an awareness of the brutality of war and the verge of death, but they also metaphorically point to death and decay. The foul smell of shit field and rotting corpses are embodied images of death, which, while shocking the soldiers' minds, also reveal the dehumanizing nature of war. Secondly, the sounds of the jungle also have narrative significance and metaphorical value. The sounds in the narrative can be roughly divided into five categories: natural sounds (e.g., rain, wind, flowing water); the inner voices of the soldiers; gunfire, explosions, and shouting; music and singing; and hallucinations or surreal sounds. These five types of sounds are interwoven to form a soundscape of narrative. For example, while the external world is the sound of a silent, dark night, Kiowa's mind is filled with the sound of Lavender falling when shot. The sounds of gunfire and explosions, mixed with cries and prayers, collide in the extreme jungle battlefield, impacting the soldiers' minds and leading to hallucinations where they hear "gook opera," "violins and cellos," "mama-san soprano," "cocktail parties," "glee club," "Haiphong Boys Choir," "barbershop quartets" …Even more bizarre, they hear "rocks talking," "trees talking politics," "monkeys talking religion" (O'Brien 1990, 71). These seemingly fantastical descriptions of sound reflect the absurdity and irrationality of war, as well as the soldiers' surreal experiences in the war. At the same time, these sounds carry unique meaning. The sounds of gunfire and explosions are the most direct sounds of war, symbolizing death, violence, and destruction. These sounds constantly remind soldiers of the relentlessness of war. They also symbolize the soldiers' deep-seated fear and anxiety. Every shot and explosion can bring casualties, evoking fear of death and a desire for survival. The natural sounds represent the tranquility and eternity of nature. These sounds form a stark contrast with the bloodshed and violence on the battlefield, suggesting the transience of war and the eternity of nature. In the chaotic combat, the sounds of nature also symbolize the soldiers' inner longing for peace and calm. These sounds offer brief moments of respite, allowing soldiers to temporarily forget the horrors of war. Hallucinations and surreal sounds reflect the mental strain and psychological pressure on the soldiers in this high-stress environment. These sounds could be external manifestations of the soldiers' inner fear, anxiety, and trauma.

In conclusion, in *The Things They Carried*, the jungle is not merely the backdrop of the war; it is, in itself, a massive war machine, with the smells and sounds within it acting as "parts" of that machine, influencing human actions while simultaneously generating meaning through their interaction with humans. It is clear that the jungle has transcended its material attributes, generating meaning in human discourse through its interactions with other matter (including both human and non-human elements). The intertwining of matter and meaning, as well as the interactions between matter, drives the meaning generation, and meaning reveals the interdependence and interaction between matter. Therefore, "material structures are capable of influencing representations and other semiotic processes" (Maran 2014, 142).

4. Jungle and Narrative

Material ecocriticism "views matter as narrative texts and considers nonhuman nature as a text with narrative power, thereby deconstructing the modernist definition of the 'subject'" (Ye 33). The agency and meaning generation of matter inherently contain its narrative power, which can be understood as the ability to generate stories. In other words, not only humans can tell stories, but nonhuman matter, in showcasing their agency and meaning generation abilities, also write their own stories. In *The Things They Carried*, the jungle functions as a narrative text, telling the inner interactions between the past and present, humans and nature, across time and space, and recording the traumatic memories of individuals, collectives, and ecosystems.

Within the theoretical framework of thing theory, aside from treating things as "cultural representations and powerful actors, many theories also attempt to consider things as ontological beings. That is, things may also appear in narratives with a transcendent stance" (Tang 2023, 25). In *The Things They Carried*, the jungle is an ontological being of transcendence: narrated through human language but able to break free from the constraints of language, presenting its own textuality. First, the jungle environment is repeatedly mentioned in the text. Whether as the site of battle or as a crucial element in the process of recollection, it inflicts an indelible trauma on the narrator. These repeatedly recounted scenes and storylines "represent a larger and longer disaster, but without beginning, middle, or end and without meaning, resolution, or point" (Talbott 438). On the contrary, it is a memory the narrator cannot forget—a wound that can only be dulled through relentless retelling. After returning home, the veterans find themselves estranged from civilian life, their experiences rendering them perpetual outsiders, a marginalized group adrift in a society that cannot comprehend them. They struggle to articulate the horrors of the jungle to those who weren't there, and this failure of language deepens their isolation and pain. Their trauma ripples outward, ensnaring families and friends—Norman Bowker being one such casualty. Bowker watched helplessly as Kiowa sank into the jungle's shit field, swallowed alive before him. The guilt never leaves him. In the years after the war, he tries—halfheartedly—to move on: attending college, holding jobs, going through the motions of normalcy. But none of it means anything. Instead, he spends his days driving laps around a local lake, circling endlessly as if its clear waters might cleanse the filth still clinging to his memory. In a letter to O'Brien, he confesses: "There's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean. It's almost like I got killed over in Nam … Hard to describe. That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him … Feels like I'm still in deep shit" (O'Brien 1990, 150). Bowker's aimless circling isn't just a metaphor—it's a reenactment of traumatic memories. As Jarraway observes, "Bowker's car circling the lake thus becomes a powerful metaphor not only for revolving the excremental trauma of war in its suggestive displacement onto the equally punishing domestic contexts of family and community back home—'a nucleus' around which O'Brien, in his following 'Notes' chapter, would suggest his entire novel turns" (Jarraway 705) His behavior mirrors the classic symptoms of PTSD, particularly "intrusion": "Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relieve the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts" (Herman 2015, 37). The shit field rises up, unstoppable, in his mind's eye until he can no longer outdrive it. In the end, the weight of memory strangles him—not the lake's water, but the muck of Vietnam, still pulling him under decades later. Unlike male characters, the female characters in the novel, especially Mary Anne who directly enters the Vietnamese jungle battlefield, experience trauma that is more immediate and insidious. Mary Anne, who graduated from high school and came to Vietnam, is described as having "long white legs and blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream." (O'Brien 1990, 89) By the time Mary Anne disappears into the shadows of the jungle, her face "had the composure of someone perfectly at peace with herself," wearing "a necklace of human tongues." (O'Brien 1990, 105) The war disrupts order, subverts reason, and returns us to bodily instincts. This explosive release frees people from the constraints of civilized rules, turning them into bloodthirsty, brutal war machines. In Mary Anne's words, "Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me." (O'Brien 1990, 106) Mary Anne's transformation on one hand illustrates that "Women who never go to war are not innocent so much as they are ignorant of their own capacity for violence." (Smiley 604) On the other hand, it starkly demonstrates the jungle's dual destruction of both body and mind. The utterly foreign environment of war shatters her previous understanding of the world, leading to identity confusion and a loss of cultural belonging. This cultural and existential displacement is a key source of her psychological trauma. She is no longer the innocent girl who first arrived; the brutality and bloodlust of war have left her increasingly detached and numb—a

clear marker of deep psychological scars. Mary Anne's experience also reflects the challenges women face in a wartime environment. As an ordinary woman, her identity and role expectations are different from those of men in the face of war; she must adapt to the male-dominated jungle life and wartime rules. This confusion of identity and uncertainty about gender roles has a profound impact on her personal trauma. Mary Anne ultimately disappears in the jungle, her fate unknown, which not only suggests her gradual loss and dissolution of personal identity in the wartime environment but also symbolizes the silence and marginalization of female individuals in war, while indicating the deep psychological and emotional destruction war causes her. Therefore, Mary Anne's traumatic experience is not only about the psychological and physical pressures brought by war but also about the redefinition and challenge of her own identity and gender role. Her transformation in the war is both a symbol of individual psychological trauma and a profound influence on the identity recognition of female roles in the context of war.

Beyond individual trauma, the jungle also embodies the collective psychological wounds of the entire soldier cohort. In the extreme conditions of war, the men rely on camaraderie to survive—a bond that becomes integral to their shared identity. Yet when comrades like Curt Lemon, Lavender, and Kiowa perish one after another, that collective identity fractures, transforming the jungle into a vast landscape of shared trauma. Here, soldiers battle not only for survival but also against the crisis of who they are as a group. This trauma becomes permanently etched into their memory, evolving into what Jeffrey Alexander terms "cultural trauma"—a phenomenon that arises "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways." (Alexander 2012, 6) The American soldiers enter the Vietnamese jungle clinging to memories and notions of home, convinced that it's "a nature hike, not even a war" (O'Brien1990, 66). But this naivety is relentlessly eroded by the alien jungle environment. The jungle's primal isolation severs them from their homeland's familiar touchstones, while the dehumanizing nature of war corrodes their cultural value systems. As a result, "this land inflicts unspeakable wounds upon the soldiers' souls, stealing who they once were, transforming them utterly, stripping away their dignity and honor, and drowning them in inescapable agony and fear." (Shi and Dang 101) In other words, the cultural trauma wrought by the jungle damages not only individual psyches but also collective behaviors and memories, fundamentally altering their identity relative to mainstream America. This alienation renders them marginal figures in postwar society, compounding their suffering with secondary trauma. Lurking beneath the text is the real Vietnam War, which ignited profound moral and political disillusionment across America. From the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident to the war's end, the public gradually realized their government had concealed the war's true motives—a betrayal that lacerated the nation's moral and political conscience, leaving a searing ethical wound at the societal level. Simultaneously, the war fractured American society. Anti-war protests erupted, pitting conservative hawks against liberal doves in bitter ideological clashes that undermined national unity. As Renny Christopher observes, "For thirty years, 'Vietnam' has, for most Americans, been the name of a war. That war has occupied a central position in American political and cultural discussion. The political positions that were laid out during the war along the spectrum from conservative to liberal, pro- and anti-involvement, have become entrenched in American cultural reworkings of the war." (Christopher 1996, 1) Postwar America underwent deep introspection. The conflict's failure and staggering death toll spurred criticism of wartime leadership, while also galvanizing advocacy for veterans. This reckoning with historical complexity reshaped the nation's self-perception and identity, leaving scars that still inform America's collective memory.

War inflicts wounds not only upon people but also upon the ecological environment, leaving enduring scars that manifest both materially and narratively. From the very beginning, the narrator catalogs an arsenal of wartime weaponry—tools designed to inflict human casualties that simultaneously ravage the natural world and disrupt ecological order. To advance military objectives and

deny the enemy cover, forests are clear-cut, rice fields trampled, and water sources poisoned, shattering the delicate balance of the jungle ecosystem and obliterating habitats for flora and fauna. The rupture of these interdependent relationships triggers a collapse of the ecological chain, with long-term consequences for the system's stability. Postwar soil and water contamination, for instance, spawn persistent ecological and health crises—injuries that resist quick remediation and linger as festering wounds upon the land. The destruction of the jungle's ecology directly imperils the indigenous communities who depend on it, eroding traditional ways of life and livelihoods. On a narrative level, the storyteller intertwines war's brutality with environmental devastation to forge a visceral atmosphere. Take, for example, the "shit field" in the jungle—a site explicitly linked to death. Its existence not only mirrors the squalid conditions endured by soldiers but also functions as a metaphor for war's essence. On one hand, it underscores how war degrades human dignity, laying bare the humanitarian crises and moral decay it spawns; on the other, the field becomes a microcosm of postwar ecology: chaotic, foul, useless, and disordered. When O'Brien returns to the jungle two decades later and confronts this same wasteland, he reflects, "For twenty years this field had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror." (O'Brien 1990, 176) The observation lays bare war's catastrophic impact on nature. Thus, the jungle's ecological imbalance is more than a consequence of war—it serves as a stark warning about humanity's relationship with the natural world, urging us to confront warfare's environmental toll and its protracted repercussions. As part of war's legacy, the jungle's scars transcend time and space, hampering postwar recovery while also shaping how the conflict is remembered and reckoned with.

5. Conclusion

The Things They Carried starts in Asia, crosses the Pacific, and reaches the Americas. Timewise, it moves from the past to the present, back to the past, and then returns to the present again—this narrative transcends space and time, realistically depicting the Vietnam War and the trauma it caused. It subtly suggests O'Brien's sincere anti-war sentiment and his concerns about the dual destruction—both natural and spiritual—caused by war. The jungle serves as a material text that tells a story, documenting the relationship between people and matter in war. The daytime and nighttime in the jungle, along with the smells, sounds, rivers, and shit field, serve as important material elements that connect the soldiers' life journeys from birth to death. These elements record their psychological states and demonstrate their powerful agency. The jungle symbolizes the cruelty and unpredictability of war while reflecting the soldiers' inner fear and despair. Through its depiction of the jungle, O'Brien reveals the senselessness and destructiveness of war, offering a harsh critique of it. The jungle represents the memories of past wars and bears the pain of present-day warfare. It exists as an aloof presence in the collective memory of the soldiers and the nation, becoming an inescapable psychological trauma. Post-war remnants like denotators, bombs, and viruses still persist in the jungle, causing lasting damage to local residents and the environment. They also stand as symbols of both soldier and ecological trauma. Undoubtedly, the jungle battlefield showcases the brutal reality of the Vietnam War, allowing people to understand that war is not a cold, historical event but a deeply emotional reality, felt through the thing's perspective. This understanding encourages a reevaluation of war, an acknowledgment of its trauma, recognition of its true nature, and an appreciation of the fragility of peace.

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