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The Impact of Vietnam War in the Works of Philip Roth

Jayanta Kumar Jena*

PhD Scholar, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack

Abstract – The main purpose of the article lies with the Vietnam War literature that has passed through several distinct phases. It will show how this war and its repercussions have been the central theme of Philip Roth's writings. Without any doubt, generations of future historians will puzzle over the complexities of the Vietnam controversy. There are issues of local, national, and international significance, now intermixed, which will have to be untangled and studied in the light of history's perspective. Underneath these popular issues which daily exacerbate the press and the politicians, historians of the future may find several facets which have not received contemporary attention, and which deserve penetrating examination.

Keywords – War, Issues, Experience, Brutality, Attack, Struggle, Psychology, Refugee, Diversity, Strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

These facets of the Vietnam controversy and other facets of our national life are of particular interest to the Society. In these areas of young peoples' activities, civil rights, and political thought, the Society has already gathered an imposing quantity of material and the same is done in such other segments of state and national interest as conservation, labour and business history, and mass communications, to name a few. The sole objective is to make available, at the appropriate time, the resources which historians will need to evaluate contemporary events. The raw materials collected today will become the source materials of tomorrow.

The Vietnam War, in which millions of Americans fought and in which over 50,000 of them died, which for many Americans was a direct, painful, and unforgettable experience, and for all of them part of their lives for a very long time, left its mark on their literature and art, and of course became a subject for historians and scholars. The article aims at giving a succinct view of the way Vietnam scholarship has developed and of the trends it is following.

One of the most significant products of the recent deluge of books on Vietnam is the glimpse of an enemy noted for elusiveness. A cautionary note is necessary at the outset. The information is still no more than fragmentary. Most of what we have has also been provided by former Vietcong, many of them non-Communists who fled post-war Vietnam, and the refugee literature must be treated with the utmost care. That being said, recent books still give us a view of incredible sacrifice and suffering on the part of the Vietnamese guerrillas, shed a bit of light on the interaction between North Vietnam and the southern revolutionaries, and provide some important insights into the impact of United States policy in Vietnam.

But the student interest in the Vietnam controversy has reached an unparalleled intensity and had an unparalleled reaction in high government circles. Senators and Congressmen, State Department officials and White House aides have rushed to university and college campuses for debate and discussion, incidentally, acknowledging the power of student voices. At least one member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has asserted that student interest helped to initiate the national debate on Vietnam policy.

The Vietnam War has produced a voluminous, varied, and in some instances distinguished literature. Soldiers turned author have written important works of fictionranging from Tim O'Brien's surrealistic *Going after Cacciato* to John M. Del Vecchio's epic *The 13th Valley*. Veterans have produced numerous memoirs, runningthe gamut of emotions from Philip Caputo's classic story of disillusionment, *ARumor of War*, to Frederick Downs's gung-ho *The Killing Zone*. Oral history gainedrespectability during the Vietnam era and proved particularly suitable for Vietnam-related subjects, and Al Santoli's*Everything We Had* and Mark Baker's *Nam* pioneered the genre. It would be necessary to go back at least to World War I to finda literature dealing with the personal experience of war

comparable in size and introspectiveness to that of Vietnam.'

The firstphase reflected national disenchantment with the war and was best exemplified inCaputo's *A Rumor of War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. Caputo's personal experience was in a sense a metaphor for the national experience. He was lured to warby John F. Kennedy's inaugural pledge to "pay any price, bear any burden, meetany hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and thesuccess of liberty." Once in Vietnam, he found his ideals corroded by the harsh climate and the peculiar brutality of guerrilla warfare. Disillusioned, he returnedhome and joined the anti-war movement. Set in the period after the 1968 Tet Offensive, Herr's *Dispatches* tells the story of the "grunt" in the lingo of rock music andexpresses in compelling terms the peculiar insanity of that war.2

A new phase came with the publication of Santoli's*Everything We Had* andBaker's *Nam* in 1981. The books were published at a time when Vietnam veteranswere just beginning to express the rage they had bottled up for years. Both bookswere based on oral-history interviews, in Santoli's case by a veteran, in Baker's, bya nonveteran. Through interviews with many different veterans, the books beganto convey something of the diversity of the Vietnam experience. They differedsharply in tone. The veterans interviewed by Baker tended to share Caputo's cynicism and disillusionment. Santoli's veterans, on the other hand, were more matterof fact and upbeat about their experiences, while conceding the often strange circumstances in which they found themselves. It was the story, Santoli later wrote,of "ordinary human beings caught in an awesome nightmare not of our making."

A second facet which may deserve investigation by future historians is the relationshipbetween the civil rights movement and thesustained public interest in the Vietnam controversy. Heretofore in our history, interracial problems were generally compartmentalized. Individual abolitionists dabbled invarious other reforms like temperance orwomen's suffrage, but the thrust of abolitionism excluded major involvement in othermovements. After the Civil War, Northerners and Southerners debated "the Negro question" as if it had no relationship to other issues; and when Progressivism emerged as apolitical force in the twentieth century, theNegro question was gently shunted aside.

Books and short stories on the Vietnam Conflict began to appear as earlyas 1963, although it was not until about 1968 that what was but a trickle became a steady flow.Long before those dates, an Englishman wrote a book which canreferring to Graham Greene's The Quiet American (1955). It is a work that strangenot be forgotten when dealing with the American involvement in Indochina.

The literary works dealing with the war are, of course, much too numerousto be listed here. Two annotated bibliographies, both of which record only primary sources, are useful to the student of this literature. They are John Newman's*Vietnam War Literature* (1982) and Merritt Clifton's *Those Who Were There*(1984). The latter lists only books written by veterans, many of which unfortunately are out of print and difficult to find. There are about a dozen volumes of poetry and six plays, but the vast majorityof the literary output to come out of the Vietnam War are prose works. They,in turn, can be divided into five major categories. To the first one would belongpieces of straight journalism, books written by war correspondents in Vietnamwho attempt to capture the mood and psychology of the American soldier.Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most extravagantly praised of theseworks is Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, which beautifully captures the language ofthe soldiers but displays a romantic, sophomoric yearning side.

The renewed interest in the Vietnam War is reflected in the number of coursestaught on different aspects of the conflict in universities across the United States.They range from the purely historical to the purely literary, not forgetting thestudy of the media coverage both during and after the war, and of the films basedon the conflict. The situation now is a far cry from what it was in 1970, when a survey made by the New York Times found that there was not a single scholarin the country who devoted most of his or her time to the study of Vietnam.Although the situation had changed, still in 1983 the same newspaper found thataccording to the Social Science Research Council in New York, from 1951 to 1981, out of a total of 820 Americans who applied for financial aid to write their dissertations, only twenty-three were writing on Vietnam. The first American dissertation on the war literature from that conflict that I have found is dated in 1974,and to date only ten more have been read in the United States. I know of onemore in Germany, and of course there may be more in other countries, but myconcern here is with American scholarship.

As for literary criticism, to date there is only one full length study of the literature of the Vietnam War. It is Philip D. Beidler' s*American Literature and theExperience of Vietnam* (1982). Beidler is a veteran of the war. This gives him aunique vantage point from which to examine the fiction of the conflict. He is alsoa university professor. The fact is that a good number of Vietnam veterans arenow teaching courses and doing scholarly work on the war they so well know,this is a proof that the so much needed detachment to deal with the question hasfinally been achieved. Beidler himself is the author of several articles on the fiction of Vietnam and they, as well as his book, are extremely valuable starting pointsfor its study. Other books of literary criticism include chapters on the fiction ofVietnam. Among these volumes are *The American Soldier in Fiction*: 1880-

1963(1975) by Peter Aichinger and Wayne C. Miller's *An Armed America* (1970). Theyare studies which trace the tradition and development of American literature andthey analyse the changing images of the soldier in the letters of the United States.Another study dealing with the literature of the age is *The American* 1960's byJerome Klinkowitz, co-editor of Writing under Fire (1971). This last title is ananthology of short stories from the Vietnam War.

Among the many texts that provide useful information is *The Sixties* (1982), edited by Gerald Howard. The volume gives us a collection of relevant articles on the period by authors that include Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Baldwin, Mailer, MacLuhan, Tom Wolfe, Susan Sontang, and manyothers. It gives us a marvellous and sometimes surprising insight into the supposedly optimistic, hopeful 1960's. Joan Didion's book *The White Album* (1972),and her Slouching towards Bethlehem (1961), although intensely personal and centred in scenes of California life provide an interesting if rather depressing viewof the mood of the States in those days. The fact that they necessarily lack perspective makes the vision of the 60's one of chaos which, from our perspectivein the 80's, is very interesting.William L. O'Neill in *Coming Apart* (1971) starts his analysis of the decade with the Eisenhower administration and he reviews the main events of the sixties,creating a socio-cultural analysis of the country, quite interesting as backgroundto the literature. *America in Our Time* (1976) by Godfrey Hodgson follows roughlythe same approach as O'Neill, but it places a stronger emphasis on intellectualhistory. This is the case also for Morris Dickstein's Gates of Eden (1977) whichis very definitely a cultural history, very much centred on literature.

The study of films on Vietnam is, in fact, interesting as the reflection of themood of the country. As The New York Times pointed out, the most commonoutlook reflected in films is the calculatedly apolitical one. Rather than raise thestill divisive issue of the right or wrong of American intervention in Vietnam, theyconcentrate on the experiences of the individual soldier, a point which they havein common with the novels. That may be why, again according to the New YorkTimes, a recent poll of Vietnam veterans showed that their favourite films wereComing Home and The Green Berets. In obviously such disparate films, the Vietnam veteranis a hero and a victim. This fact may explain the results of the poll.In my conversations withVietnam veterans who are also writers and scholars,I have found out that they admire *Apocalypse Now* for its recreation of the moodof the war (except for the case of Kurtz's character) and they intensely dis-likeMissing in Action and Rambo which they regard as totally fantastic. Accordingto John Milivs, who co-authored *Apocalypse Now*, what the country is lookingfor, ten years after the war, is the figure of a hero, and he adds that becausehe lost the most, because he did it seemingly for nothing (the Vietnam veteran)will become the most romanticized war hero in American literature (The NewYork Times, March 31, 1985). Although ostensibly dealing with World War IIand Korea respectively, other films and novels like *Catch 22* and *M.A.S.H.* arereally about Vietnam. Like the novels written by veterans, while defending theindividual soldier, they present an attack on war in general, and, also like thenovels, they are void of any ideological content.

One of the most widely read books on Vietnam history is Guenter Lewy's*America in Vietnam* (1978) which traces U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia fromthe 50's on. The United States appear as trapped from the beginning, with theCommunists always controlling not only when and how to fight, but consequentlythe rhythm of American escalation. Lewy also finds that all Presidents (includingJohnson) were reluctant to go all the way for a decisive victory. He seems to puta great deal of the blame on the generals for their mismanagement of a conflictwhich was tactically different from any fought before.Several books by journalists make interesting reading and give a more «chatty»account of the struggle. Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam* (1983) again underlines therefusal of successive Presidents to make an all-out effort in the war. He stresseshow the Communists saw the war as the continuation of 2,000 years of resistanceto foreign domination and were ready to accept limitless loses, while the U.S. simplywas not ready to pay that much of a price for victory. He maintains it was a warnobody won, a statement not accepted by Norman Podhoretz who, in a recentarticle: *The Vietnam Experience*(Current September 1984) sees the outcomeof the war as a clear Communist victory. David Habelrstram, also a journalistand the author of The Best and the Brightest, a study of the men of the Kennedyadministration, wrote *Vietnam: The Making of a Quagmire* (1970) which tracesthe relentless closing of a deadly trap into which the U.S. fell. Michael McLear,the first TV correspondent to write from Vietnam, includes in his *The Ten Thousand Day War* interviews with those involved on both sides of the fighting. Hisaccount is interesting and full of human details.

Among the histories written by the military are General Westmoreland's *ASoldier Reports* (1976) and Colonel Dave R. Palmer's *Summons of the Trumpet*(1978) both interesting to follow the course of the war and its tactical details.David G. Marr has written two books, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism*, 1885-1925(1971) and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial,* 1920-1945 (1981) showing how the Communists under Ho-Chi-Minh were able to build their strength in the 1930's and40's by appealing to the traditional Vietnamese nationalism. A thesis confirmedby William Dniker in *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (1981). Oneother book (and there are many more) which provides an insight into the psychology of the Vietnamese is J. Herring's *Silence Was a Weapon*.

The renewed interest in Vietnam scholarship in the United states may be, ofcourse, the result of the need of a country to come to terms with a dark chapterin its history and the traumatic fact of its first

military defeat. But it is clear thatwith history as well as with literature there is a need for a certain objectivity, acertain distance from the events. That objectivity is found now in the approachto both history and the literature that portrays that history as it was lived by anindividual. There is no need any more to take sides; historical facts can be analysed coldly and literary works judged from a purely literary point of view. Practically none of the students taking courses on Vietnam were born when the warwas at its worst, and those teaching them, even the Vietnam veterans, haveachieved the necessary detachment. The scholarship produced at the height of theAmerican involvement in Vietnam must be approached in view of subsequent events and more recent research. We must recall that much valuable information aboutthe development of the war has not been made available until very recently.

A veritable outpouring of books accompanied the tenth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, and this essay will subject to collective review a sampling of this third phase of the literature. The books vary in form. *The Tunnels of Cu Chi* is a standard work of history written by two British journalists and based on extensive interviews with Vietnamese and Americans and on research in available printed sources. Employing the same techniques, he used in Everything We Had, Santoli has broadened the story in *To BearAny Burden* by going back to the origins of the Vietnamese revolution in 1945 and by adding interviews with United States civilian officials and Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. Dear America, is a compilation of letters written from Vietnam during the war and collected for the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The remaining books are memoirs written by participants.

One of the most significant products of the recent deluge of books on Vietnam is the glimpse of an enemy noted for elusiveness. A cautionary note is necessary at the outset. The information is still no more than fragmentary, and it would be presumptuous to assume that we have anything more than a glimpse. Most of what we have has also been provided by former Vietcong, many of them non-Communists who fled postwar Vietnam, and the refugee literature must be treated with the utmost care. That being said, recent books still give us a view of incredible sacrifice and suffering on the part of the Vietnamese guerrillas, shed a bit of light on the interaction between North Vietnam and the southern revolutionaries, and provide some important insights into the impact of United States policy in Vietnam. Nothing perhaps better suggests the nature of the war and the difficulties Americans faced than Tom Mangold and John Penycate's fascinating story of the tunnels of Cu Chi. During the wars with France and the United States, the Vietminh and later Vietcong dug by hand thousands of miles of tunnels. One of the most important complexes was in the Cu Chi region in the famed Iron Triangle near Saigon. The tunnels connected villages and linked staging areas to battle zones. Inside those subterranean fortresses were supply depots, ordnance factories, hospitals, printing presses, sleeping quarters, kitchens, even theaters for propaganda plays. Those who lived, worked, and fought inside the tunnels suffered heat, stench, shortages of air and food, vermin and disease, and harassment from the best that American technology had to offer, including gas and B- 52 bombs.

A superb collection of letters, Bernard Edelman's Dear America, perhaps better than any other single book, tells the story of the American GIs in Vietnam. It re-counts the ordeal of the "grunts," those soldiers who "humped the boonies" in search of an elusive and deadly enemy and who endured a climate and terrain so harsh that one was moved to propose that the "national flower of Vietnam should be an immense thorn." It also tells the often-neglected story of the REMFs (Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers), the support troops who for much of the war constituted the great majority of American servicemen in Vietnam. As their name suggests, the REMFs were generally held in contempt by the grunts, but some of them lived a nerve-racking existence in vulnerable base camps always under threat from enemy rocket and mortar fire. Others lived in relative isolation and security and spent their 365 days doing routine jobs, with boredom the major problem. A resident of "Long Binh, U.S.A." observed that he had never truly been in Vietnam. The war was re- mote, he said, and most of his knowledge about it came from the Associated Press. "No one actually does anything here," he added. "I have had a shit existence on a bad army post in a deserted area." The recent memoirs chronicle a great variety of stories. A West Point graduate, McDonough in the summer of 1970 took command of a platoon whose mission was to "pacify" the village of Truong Lam in Vietcong-infested BinhDinh province. For the next year, as he recounts in Platoon Leader, his platoon conducted regular day and night patrols, inflicting heavy losses on the insurgents but suffering slow attrition itself mainly through booby traps. The very success of the platoon, McDonough concedes, ensured its ultimate failure.

Without always intending to, the other books provide useful correctives to Santoli's parochial, politically charged explanation of American failure. Donovan and McDonough offer some devastating commentary on officer-ship in the United States Army in the latter stages of the war. The huge gap that divided Americans and South Vietnamese, so dramatically manifest in these volumes, was certainly as important a factor in their ultimate failure as was a bad strategy or dissent in the United States. The books also provide abundant evidence of a fundamental and apparently unsolvable problem -the weakness of the South Vietnamese government. There are numerous indications of the extent to which the government had been penetrated by the Vietcong at all levels, and even the usually upbeat Donovan concedes that in his district the top

South Vietnamese officials were hopelessly corrupt and were a hindrance to the work he was doing.

A major weakness of the books reviewed here, especially the memoirs, is the in- evitable lack of historical perspective. Tang was associated with the conflict from be- ginning to end, and his memoir does provide a sense of the ebb and flow of thirty years of revolution and war. Santoli's oral histories purport to treat the war historically, but his methods- most notably his selection of subjects- mislead rather than elucidate. In most of the other cases, the authors served in but one area of Vietnam for but one year, and the reader sees only a small slice of the war for a short period of time. The books provide little sense of how the Indochina wars began, how the Communists took control of the nationalist movement, and how the First Indochina War led to the Second. That the United States should have been in Vietnam is a given in most of them. Yet no explanation is offered of how it became involved, and the dubious premises on which intervention was based are never raised, much less examined. Those who confine their Vietnam reading to this kind of book will there- fore get only a fragmentary and misleading view of the broader historical forces that gave the war its peculiar dynamism and do so much to explain its outcome and consequences.

Taken together, the books of Roth provide us an overview view of the war from the Vietcong side and they offer important insights into the interaction between Americans and South Vietnamese. They convey in very clear fashion the enormous diversity of experiences undergone by Americans in the war and the very different ways in which they responded to these experiences. In fact, the Vietnam war at the centre stage on the writings of Philip Roth

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Corresponding Author

Jayanta Kumar Jena*

PhD Scholar, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack

jenajayanta9@gmail.com