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The Philosophical Paradox of Pressured Passion in Tim O’ Brien’s “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and Rajesh Parameswaran’s “The Infamous Bengal Ming”

“You know what, girl?!” Mae rhetorically asked, “You don’t need him!”

“It’s not your fault.” Jay added.

“This kind of thing just happens. Life happens, ya know?” Mari continued.

“He was a jerk anyways.” Abby chuckled.

After hearing seemingly infinite statements about my love life, or now lack thereof, I was getting annoyed. Although I appreciated the support from my closest friends, hearing these post break-up mantras got exasperating. Every line regurgitated towards me from my friends, my family, or *Cosmopolitan* articles left me with a sour taste in my mouth. Sure, ‘young love’ is naïve and stupid and temporary, but people who experience heartbreak (minor or major, platonic or romantic), are left asking “What did I do wrong?” and “What could I have done?” Of course, these have answers, but sometimes the answers aren’t so straightforward. In fact, attempting to dwell and clutch fleeting relationships will only leave people feeling guilty and alone. I had to, coincidentally, read articles, papers, essays, and textbooks on romantic and platonic relationships; and it wasn’t until I took an analytical and philosophical approach to love, in general, that I truly began to understand the consequences of trying to control what cannot be controlled.

Tim O’ Brien’s “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” and Rajesh Parameswaran’s “The Infamous Bengal Ming” share a common thread regarding the cost of control; through a philosophical lens, both can be seen as cautionary tales about the dangerous and emotional price of literally gripping a relationship to please one’s need for love and companionship.

Tim O’ Brien is an American novelist who fought in the Vietnam War. His novel, *The Things They Carried* is a realistic fiction with short stories inspired by actual events he experienced while he was in combat. “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is the story within a story. In a presentation hosted by Arlington Public Library in Texas, Tim O’ Brien explains that the story itself was a false fable, constantly told during his time in combat. He had heard the story so many times, he admits that he “didn’t believe a word of it… because it was a woman, period!” It wasn’t until he was at a book signing in Seattle that he met this man telling O’Brien ‘the story of the woman who was at the Tra Bong Camp? I was there, nobody believed me… and it’s pissing me off!” (Brien, Tim O'Brien on "The Things They Carried" 58:10-1:04:15). Inspired by that experience, he used “Rat Kiley, (a Vietnam War veteran), to tell the story,” (Brien, Tim O'Brien on "The Things They Carried" 58:10-1:04:15) of a young soldier named Mark Fossie, and the events that took place after he flew his girlfriend, Mary Anne Bell, from their small hometown. Initially, the two kids “were very much in love, full of dreams… over the next two weeks, they stuck together like a pair of high school steadies” (Brien 106) ; but after some time, “The war intrigued [Mary Anne]. The land, too, and the mystery… The hostile environment did not seem to register.” (Brien 107) This fascination led to her decision to choose the way of the Vietnam landscape, and in the end, leaving Mark Fossie alone and in grief, for “There was nothing to be done.” (Brien 121).

Rajesh Parameswaran, author of “I Am An Executioner; Love Stories,” is an Indian American who graduated from Yale Law School (Penguin Random House). His stories use both animals and people from a first-person perspective to focus on the puzzling aspects of love and life (Choudhury). One of the stories in this book, “The Infamous Bengal Ming,” is the story of a tiger that lives in a local zoo. He realizes that he has an intense, platonic love for his zoo keeper, Kitch. Filled with excitement and glee, Ming rushes to Kitch, but accidently slaughters him. Ming, desperate for help, ventures outside the zoo, and slays a human baby and an old lady. It is while he consumes them both that he is overcome with both grief and joy, for he “had never felt so much love in all [his] life.” (Parameswaran 23). In a short interview from *Granta* (a website dedicated to international writers), Yuka Igarashi, the former managing editor at *Granta*, asks Parameswaran “[in your book] These are tales of longing and devotion that just happen to include maulings, a botched surgery, stoning and impaling. What compels you to mix love with gore?” and Parameswaran replied, “To be honest, I didn’t know these were going to be ‘love stories’ or that they were going to tilt towards violence until I’d finished them. I could tell you that love, and violence are basic forces interwoven through all of nature and human affairs, and that’s why I mix the two…” (Parameswaran, Rajesh Parameswaran | Interview)

Both these stories can be seen as cautionary tales because of the sequence of events the protagonists inflict on themselves, for the sake of love. Firstly, there is a behavior or concept that has been initially established as unorthodox or dangerous. Secondly, the protagonist hears the warning, but does not head it; he instead does the opposite, and when things don’t go well, he attempts to undo the damage that has been done. Thirdly, whether or not he attempts to undo the damage, the situation only gets worse, and the protagonist experiences loss or grief. In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” Mark Fossie, (the protagonist) is one of the soldiers in the Tra Bong camp. He and his other fellow soldiers discuss “A joke, really… pool some bucks and bring in a few mama-sans from Saigon, spice things up… [the idea] was nothing serious… playing with possibilities… and how you could actually get away with it.” (Brien 104). This begins the first step of the cautionary tale. It has been established by the majority party that even though the idea of bringing women over to their base camp would be easy and fun, it wouldn’t be a good idea to. Doing so could lead to a lot of trouble from their officers, or worse. They explain the possibility as a joke, but later moved onto a different subject, until “Later that night, though, a young medic named Mark Fossie kept coming back to the subject.” (Brien 104). The protagonist, Fossie, elucidates that ‘you could really do it.” (Brien 105). Protagonists question the norm that has been established by the group that he is a part of; in Fossie’s case, he is a part of the military subculture, and it is a norm to abide by military guidelines for the safety of the soldiers. It isn’t until “six weeks later his girlfriend showed up.” (Brien 105). Fossie, being like most protagonists in cautionary tales, disregarded the warning of a pre-existing notion; although it may seem innocent at first, this disregard leads to dangerous results.

Ming is a tiger that lives in a local zoo. In his enclosure, he lives with Saskia (the only young, female tiger) and Maharaj (dominant male tiger who physically and emotionally abuses Ming). It isn’t said as directly as the “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” but it is established that these are animals that live in captivity, and even when people visit the zoo, their job as zoo animals is to entertain and to limit their interaction with humans. Ming normally doesn’t “mind the people who visit the zoo. They have their business, and I have mine. They come, watch for a few minutes, point and stare, eat their ice creams and whatever, I don’t care.” (Parameswaran 6). He is annoyed when the homeless “row-your-boat lady,” as Ming calls her, sat and sang loudly, “sweatered and stinking, hair astray, grinning with her broken teeth.” (Parameswaran 8) but she soon fell asleep. Visitors get annoying, but the relationship between zoo visitor and zoo animal is clear. It is strange (and even dangerous) for humans to get too close to the animals in the enclosures; so, they watch the zoo animals and leave. It is strange for Ming to attempt excessive contact with humans, even with Kitch, his caretaker for essentially Ming’s entire life. Ming, knowing this behavior is, *at least*, somewhat unorthodox (completely unaware of the danger), couldn’t care less, “Kitch was here! And I loved him!... And my love couldn’t contain itself, and I wanted to make Kitch feel it, too. I pranced right up to Kitch, to just about three feet away from him, as close as I had ever been… I meant to say… I love you.” (Parameswaran 10). This encounter is a break from what has been established as normal behavior. Much like Mark Fossie brought Mary Anne closer to him by bringing her to Vietnam in an attempt to make their love stronger, Ming tries to bring himself closer to Kitch by attempting to embrace him. These actions by the protagonists are naïve and hopelessly optimistic. Sometimes the norm should be questioned, and other times, it should be acknowledged and follow for the safety of themselves and others. Ming and Fossie question the majority ideal of appropriate behavior, but their choice in going against this norm has harmful consequences. It isn’t until they realize these consequences that they attempt to undo their action, but only make their situation worse. And in this case, Ming’s and Fossie’s loved ones are the ones that truly suffer.

Ming’s and Fossie’s choice affected them indirectly. Their loved ones are the ones that truly pay the price for the protagonist’s mistakes. Once Fossie starts to see that “The war intrigued [Mary Anne]. The land, too, and the mystery… The hostile environment did not seem to register.” (Brien 107), he feels pride first, and then concern for Mary Anne. She ventures the Vietnam land, possibly getting herself into trouble during ambushes with the Greenies. Fossie “laid down the law… compromise[d]” about her behavior while on base (Brien 114). Once that was established, it still wasn’t enough, so he decides to send her back home (Brien 115). Mary Anne doesn’t refuse, but she isn’t gleeful about it either. The war has such a powerful effect on her, so she never actually makes it home. Instead, she wanders the Vietnam jungle with the Green Berets, and becomes unrecognizable to Fossie. Her entire personality changes, and not necessarily for the better. Fossie has attempted to undo the results of his actions, but by forcing Mary Anne to ‘stay put’ on base, it only drives Mary Anne away. He is only giving her more reasons to escape the world she once lived in. His attempts only make his situation worse. And the main reason he is doing this is because he is aware that his decision to bring Mary Anne to Vietnam is not healthy for her. Protagonists in cautionary tales attempt to undo the results of their decisions, and sometimes, their actions only ruin the possibility of improvement.

Ming, from “The Infamous Bengal Ming,” was so gleeful and excited he attempted to hug his zookeeper, Kitch. Kitch, acting differently then usual, becomes defensive, and hits Ming. Ming, now angry, pounces on Kitch, ultimately killing him. Ming “had bitten him on the neck... thick streams of blood began to spout…” (Parameswaran 11). Ming is filled with emotion; first joy for his keeper, then anger after Kitch becomes defensive and “raised this long stick high above his head and brought it down hard on my nose.” (Parameswaran 10) Once Ming had saw what he had done to the one he loved, “[he] had to put a stop to this. I had to reverse whatever this was that had happened… I licked his neck from where the blood was coming and tried to make the blood stop…” (Parameswaran 12) As he kept trying to make the blood stop pouring from the keeper’s body, Ming had “a realization that made me want to lick and lick faster, and keep licking forever. The realization was: Kitch’s blood was delicious… I turned around to look for help… Nobody would help him… I had to find help for him…” (Parameswaran 12-13) The protagonist, overcome by his own emotion, hurt his loved one, and attempts to fix the situation, but only makes it worse. While Ming wanders the zoo, running past “hundreds of people,” and running through the city, he doesn’t recognize the barrier between human and animal interaction. For humans, he is on an angry rampage, and his attempt to find help to undo his mistake only makes the goal harder to achieve. Both character’s attempt to fix the situation only made it worse. And the situation could have been avoided if the protagonists had not made the choice put their loved ones in a dangerous situation. Their loved ones are the one’s that pay the price for their lover’s mistake.

Near the end of both stories, the protagonists feel alone and helpless. Once they realize the severity of their respective situations, there is nothing left to do but learn from it. But they don’t fully understand until a seemingly unimportant character enters to comfort them with an unfortunate truth. Rat Kiley, walks up to Fossie. Fossie is broken and empty, knowing that his girlfriend has officially left him for Vietnam. Fossie tells himself that he needs to get her back. Rat Kiley, putting his hand on his shoulder, tells the young soldier, “Didn’t you hear her, man? She’s already gone.” (Brien 121) Ming, after hurting Kitch and a human child, finds himself under a bridge downtown. The ‘row your boat lady’, comes to the bridge, unafraid of the tiger, and comforts him; “Oh, that’s a shame… Ming the merciless!” she chuckled to tiger (Parameswaran 20) Both supporting characters seem unnecessary initially, but because they were bystanders to the drama, they are there to comfort our protagonists in their time of need. They are the ones that tell their protagonists that good intentions do not always give good results.

The lesson that can be understood from the protagonist’s experience is that attempting to control love, romantic or platonic, can have devastating consequences. As Epictetus writes in *The Enchiridion*, (translated from Greek to English by Elizabeth Carter) “Some things are in our control and others are not… Things in our control are by nature free… but those not in our control are weak…Remember, that if you suppose that things which are lavish by nature are also free, and that what belongs to others is your own, then you will be hindered. You will lament, you will be disturbed, and you will find fault both with gods and men.” (Epictetus) This concept of ‘live and let live’ is called Stoicism, and it can apply to Ming and Fossie’s situation. It is unhealthy to force love and companionship; “He who fails to obtain the object of his desire is disappointed, and he who incurs the object of his aversion wretched.” (Epictetus) The figurative loss for a loved one can feel like mourning a literal death. Ming and Mark Fossie are literary examples of lovers who attempt to avoid loss by loving too much. Their decisions only make their loss more painful and the mourning process longer. No matter how much it hurts, a lesson can be learned from a loss. One can learn the importance of space, of impulse control, and how the result of one’s attempt to control the uncontrollable is philosophically and literally unsafe. One cannot gain true, authentic love when impulse and emotion alone have manufactured it.

Love is one example of the many things that are uncontainable. It is a firm force that has a huge influence in the world. Of course, things like a break-up or a divorce will leave lover’s feeling sorrowful; questions like “What did I do wrong?” or “What could I have done?” cloud the tormented mind daily. Whether it be losing a high school sweetheart to the rush of war or losing a lover to one’s own brute strength, people have good intentions; but it is important to understand self-awareness before one becomes the protagonist in their own cautionary tale of love and loss.

(2,683 words)

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