

Echoes of War-time Violence in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

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Abstract

Most Australian literary works deal with the history of the nation which is filled with the barbarity of the British convict system and the erosion of the indigenous mass. Some contemporary historical narratives deal with the trauma and violence marked by the World Wars. The winner of the Man Booker Prize (2014), Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is a highly acclaimed Australian contemporary novel that follows the war-time horrors happened to the Australian Prisoners of War at the Japanese labour camp during WW II. The present research paper focuses on the horrible echoes of that violence that emanate from the masterpiece novel.

Keywords: Australian, prisoners, war, camp, violence etc.

Introduction:

Australian literature has a very recent past to the origin of its literature, specifically the written. After its British invasion and occupation in the late 1780s as a penal colony, the Continent has witnessed the horror and violence of colonial brutality to its greatest extent. Many of the Australian writers are the descendants of the survivors of the brutal penal system as well as the Aboriginal genocides. Along with these evils of the convict system and the genocides, much of the Australian contemporary work revisits the trauma of war and its effect on the people involved in particular, and on society in general.

The Narrow Road to the Deep North is Flanagan's masterpiece that underscores the exploitation of Australian prisoners of war (POWs) at the Japanese labour camp which was set for the construction of the notorious Thai-Burma Railway track.

Content:

As the novel propels, the Australian POWs are made the slave labourers at the Thai- Burma Railway construction. The POWs consists of the Australian officers and civilians captured by the Japanese Army at different places during WW II. The novel accounts the brutality practiced against the prisoners by the Japanese officers and Korean guards. Dorigo Evans, the Commanding officer of the POWs and the chief Medical officer of the camp remains at the centre of this novel. His character is based on the real-life Australian war-hero who had been captured during the war and was one of the POWs at the camp. He is like a saviour for the helpless prisoners there.

The prisoner labourers are treated brutally by their captors at the camp. They are forced to overwork without proper food and rest. Malnutrition and diseases are what they are always surrounded with. Their bodies become reduced to a skeleton and

their souls are filled with hollowness. All of them are the victims of "varying degrees of starvation and illness". (p. 219, Flanagan, 2015)

The prisoners, as depicted in the novel, are flogged and beaten mercilessly by the officers and guard that sometimes results in the miserable death of many of them. There are numerous instances of the torture that the prisoners receive throughout the book. There is an incident where the POWs are assembled in the heavy rain for the officer Major Nakamura is to address them. One of the prisoners falls on the ground preceded by his weakness as well as sickness. Nakamura dislikes people with ill health. He begins to kick the prisoner in order to make him rise. The poor soul tries but fails and each time he fails, he receives more kicking and beating until he stops responding. Suffering with malnutrition, he cannot make it again and as described by the novelist,

"... lay in the mud, inert. His body was a wasted rack, covered in sores and ulcers and peeling skin. Pellagra, beri-beri, Christ knows what else. The man's buttocks were little more than wretched cables, out of which his anus protruded like a turkshead of a filthy rope. A stinking olive-coloured slime was oozing out and over his string shanks. Amoebic dysentery." (pp. 217-18, Flanagan, 2015)

Many of the diseases that the prisoner labourers suffer are the result of malnutrition, lack of hygiene, and restless labour. They are made to sleep on the "lice-infested bamboo platforms"

(p. 177, Flanagan, 2015) that cause them various skin diseases. The Poor medicinal aid worsens their condition and makes them suffer to death. Constant slapping and beating are the high points of their exploitation. The guards very often slap and beat them often "for no discernible reason". (p. 199, Flanagan, 2015) The prisoners are forcefully made work at the site even in their illness and despite heavy rainfall.

Several of the POWs die at that construction camp. The survivors are released at the end of the war, but with the deep wounds and scars on their souls of the violence they experienced there. They cannot lead their life the way they might have led normally. The trauma of the torture and the guilt of being unable to save their mates chisel their being. Flanagan tackles all these issues faced by the prisoner slaves skillfully in the novel.

Conclusion:

The Narrow Road to the Deep North by Richard Flanagan is an Australian contemporary war-based novel that provides a contemplating approach to the suffering of the war victims. The novel is based on the true events of POW Japanese camps and the experiences of its victims. Flanagan's father was one of the POWs working at the Thai-Burma Death Railway, the name it is known today by. Flanagan gives voice to his father's and his mates' horrible and the mind disturbing experiences through this extremely extraordinary novel. Flanagan fictionalises the characters and their experiences in an artistic way that echoes the trauma and horrors of the

time intensely. This research paper has attempted to pinpoint those echoes in order to make them even more audible and to some extent, visible.

Bibliography:

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