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Traumatic Victimization of War in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

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Abstract:

According to Alisse Waterson war is ineludible. It is fought between countries because of the insatiable desire of power. This avarice for supremacy provoked the Second World War, breeding myriad of casualties and wounded lands. Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep Road* is a novel of war and survival. The impact of war is primarily psychological though the victims are physically injured. Most of the war victims endure psychic trauma due to the haunting memories of death. They also suffer from nihilistic delusion, combat neurosis, and post-traumatic stress disorder, where all the traumatic memories are acted out repeatedly ceasing their sensory motor actions. The article concentrates on the excruciation experienced by the Japanese POWs, the aftermath of war and the resultant neurotic changes. It also analyses the cause and effect of war in a psychoanalytic perspective and argues war is an unconscious desire in men, who fought to conquer the enemy country so as to assume power over it.

Keywords: war, unconscious desire, memories, neurosis.

War is an untold mode of interplay between countries and political units, for centuries. It is a destructive strategy used by countries to establish their superiority over others, mainly grounded on a political cause. Levy and Thompson in their book *Causes of War* interpret war chiefly “. . . as *sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations*” (5). War is devastating, aggressive, violent, traumatic, and chaotic because it kills innocent people. It perishes the resources of countries, pollutes the environment causing irreparable damages. It also traumatizes people for they lose their loved ones and fellow human beings. It creates a pandemonium in a country by affecting the political and socio-economic condition. Many wars in history are because of man's greed over power and authority.

In ancient times, war is fought between empires out of greed over the enemy country for its resources and its wealth. However in the modern era, war is fought to satisfy the greediness of the elite for power. According to Manz, political leaders provoke war because, they, “. . . enjoy privilege, access to the resources of the society, and the protection of the apparatus” (qtd. in Waterson 23). They use violence to achieve this position. Most of the war casualties are civilians, since the political leaders only focus on victory. The places after war are replete with bloodshed, shattered bodies, wild cries and wretched houses. These atrocities

take place in the Second World War, which broke out because of one man's greed, named Hitler.

The novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (NRDN) is set in the background of World War II. The history retold in the novel is about POWs, who are tortured to build the Death railway in Siam 1942. The railway is built to show the potential of the Japanese Spirit to the British Empire and to conquer the world. This desire of the whole world under one emperor has destroyed Japan and led to the havoc of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The findings in the novel are, the real victims of the war are the POWs and the Japanese soldiers who are alienated from their family and the society because of the recurrent traumatic war memories. They suffer from psychological problems like combat neuroses, PTSD, and nihilistic delusion. The POWs survive war with the only hope of meeting their family. Dorrigo Evans survives war by residing on the memories of Amy, his uncle's wife. This incestuous love is because of Oedipus complex, where Dorrigo experiences a feminine fullness of his mother in Amy. He also suffers from war trauma and guilt, in not saving the fellow POWs. The focus of the thesis is to show the atrocities of war and the cause for war neuroses.

Alisse Waterson, in her work *On War and Accountability* says, "War is inevitable; an inherent part of mankind's instinctual being. It is pre-programmed, coded in our genes" (qtd. in Waterson 20). War in the world is unavoidable due to the difference in thought among superiors of different countries. As a consequence, many inhumanities, atrocities and blood sheds happen in the country. The psyche of the war veterans are affected by the impact of war, which results in psychological disturbances in their lives, with an unending effect.

According to Ferguson, "Leaders favour war because war favours leaders" (qtd. in Waterson 23). It is the lust for superiority that provoked the two world wars. In surveying the degree of atrocities between the two world wars, the Second World War surpasses the First World War. Many concentration camps, stockades, and modern weapons are introduced to torture people. The POWs are tormented by both physical and psychological infliction of pain and toil. In the Second World War, the Allied prisoners who are captured by the Japanese are treated much more brutishly than the prisoners captured by the Germans and Italian armies.

Flanagan, in NRDN concentrates on these inhumanities of the Japanese captors, the tribulations of the POWs (both physical and psychological), the aftermath of war and the resultant neurotic changes in their behavior. These POWs suffer from combat neurosis, depression and nihilistic delusion.

The excruciating physical pain of the prisoners of war in the Japanese camp is profoundly delineated in the novel. The POWs suffer from cholera, pellagra, tropical ulcer, malnutrition and starvation on top of their hectic and tiresome labor. The POWs are considered to be "Less than a man, just material to be used to make the railway, like the teak sleepers and steel rails and dog spikes" (Flanagan 114). Their agony of daily life, the laborious toil in the extremely hot jungle, their starvation diet of little gruel, the aggravating level of diseases caused by the torrential rains that flooded the Benjo (latrines) are meticulously described in the novel. The realities in depicting these incidents instigate acute



pain and pity in the readers. The racking attempts of the POWs to survive another day in the camp, their brutal beating from their Japanese captors, the invincible deaths of their fellow members, their unpredictable destiny and their diminishing hope affects them psychologically, causing numbness and suspicion in reality. Flanagan describes it as “From within [the jungle] came the groans and snores and sudden gasps of their POWs, which may have been from pain or grief of memory or dying or all of these. And washing every sound of exhaustion land aguish and hope into the mud was the inexorable drone of the torrential rain”(Flanagan 188-89).

The POWs are also deprived of their basic rights and needs. They are not given shelter and proper medication for their diseased bodies. The medical tents in the Japanese camp are deficient of basic surgical equipment. The operating theatre is a small hut and they use “. . . reflectors made out of shaped tin cans, Sterilizer made out of kerosene tins, a bamboo operating table, surgical instruments made out of honed steel stolen from engines. . .” (Flanagan 268). Pig’s gut is used for sewing up the organs; spoons are used to stop the bleeding and to cut the decayed flesh. The POWs are divided into the sick and the dying owing to the intensity of their disease.

In addition to these grievous troubles they are obliged to labor, where no mercy is shown by the Japanese captors. They are sullen, submissive, spiritless and are inflated with humiliation and animosity against the Japanese. Beside these precarious situations, the unpredictability of death also jeopardises their hope to live. According to Freud, in his *Reflection on war and Death*, human beings are inaccessible to the perception of their own death and they always reckon themselves as immortals. Man always avoid this reality of death and will live in the fantasy of being eternal. The POWs also have the same psyche in comprehending the reality of death. This is evident in the incident of killing Darky Gardiner.

While Darky Gardiner is beaten by the guards of the camp, the POWs think of the happy moments of the past, so as to avoid death, which is supposed to happen to them in future. They perceive that Darky’s death is unstoppable because of the disclosure of death’s unfeigned omnipotence. Hence they supplant the actuality of death with the fantasy of everlasting happiness. Darky’s moaning for help, is his longing to live, which is perished by the inevitable occurrence of death. He is finally disillusioned from the unconscious illusion of immortality, by the reality of death.

Amongst all these uncertainties, the POWs are always united and are helpful to each other. This is because they share one ‘libidinal tie’, which Freud explains, in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego* as, “. . . these individuals must have something in common with one another, a common interest in an object, a similar emotional bias in some situation or other. . .” (Freud 9). The common interests between the POWs that bind them psychologically are the desire to survive and to join their family, despite being different in character and behavior. This shared ‘libidinal tie’ nominates Dorrigio Evans as their leader since he fights for their lives. They call him ‘Big Fella’ for his humanity and kindness.

Dorrigo Evans' persona, in the camp, is molded by his fellow POWs. They conceive him to be virtuous, which Dorrigo himself suspects. They thrust him into the obligation to emancipate and recover them from the clutches of the infectious diseases. This encumbrance of responsibility stresses him with the duty to deliver them, but Dorrigo disdains duty for it demands stamina and fidelity. Owing to this responsibility, he pretends to be noble and deceits others. This is clearly obvious in the incident of sacrificing the steak to POWs. Although, he desperately desires to eat the steak, he declines considering it to be the test conducted by the POWs to evaluate him, as a 'Big Fella'. He does not want to expose his true intentions to them.

The conflict between the tripartite (Id, Ego, Super Ego) within Dorrigo is conspicuously vivid in his confessions, "There was Dorrigo Evans and there was this other man with whom he shared looks, habits and ways of speech. But the Big Fella was noble where Dorrigo was not, self-sacrificing where Dorrigo was selfish" (Flanagan 48). His unconscious mind wants liberation from this imposed responsibility but still as a doctor, his ego instructs him to pursue what the POWs hope. There upon, the manipulation of POWs and his own weakness entraps him consequently invoking fury in him. At this point, the Super ego takes up the command and suppresses this fury, sublimating it into kindness and compassion for the POWs. Eventually Dorrigo develops contempt for virtue.

Even though, Dorrigo is dubious about his own character, one can assume that his condolence for the people who suffer is his innate quality. Certain illustrations in the novel prove this inborn quality of Dorrigo. He dauntlessly confronts the Japanese soldiers, when they command him to send four hundred POWs to the line, regardless to their position and punishment. His fruitless endeavor to rescue Darky Gardiner, unveils his humanity. He devotedly administers the surgery to save Jack Rainbow's life. This personality of Dorrigo is distinctly explained in the following lines, "Yet everyday he carries them, nurses them, holds them, cuts them open and sews them up, play cards for their souls and dares death to save one more life" (Flanagan 203).

The frequent deaths of the POWs annoy him to a great extent because as a leader he develops emotional ties with the POWs, owing to this the deaths of the POWs taunt him profusely. Dorrigo's trauma is chiefly because of his impotence to protect the POWs rather than his own physical agony. This propels his intense guilt during the post-war life.

In addition to the understanding of the POWs, Dorrigo also apprehends the plight of the Japanese soldiers in constructing the railways. Through him, the realization that the Japanese are also the victims of war is attained. In the novel, the Japanese soldiers are picturized as symbols of cruelty and brutality. They act like supernatural beings, which possess the power to rule and order. Nevertheless in analyzing the characters profoundly, they too undergo traumatic victimization. Bound by the Japanese spirit, they are highly privileged to consummate their Emperor's will as a holy ordinance. Their adoration for the Japanese spirit is bounteous throughout the novel. In concordance with Freud, the Chief of the group is considered to be a hypnotizer. The Japanese soldiers are hypnotized by the Emperor's will which makes them blind to the basic needs and medications of the POWs.



They force them, to labor for constructing the Railways, since the Emperor demands it. They are all hypnotized by the Emperor, because though they understand the pain and agony of the POWs, they are heedless, so as to fulfill the requirements of the Emperor. It is evident in these lines “Nakamura knew many . . . die trying to get these. Perhaps most. But the railway demanded it, the Emperors had ordered the railway. . .” (Flanagan 13)

The Japanese soldiers believe that rendering kindness among the POWs is a weakness, so they ruthlessly torture the POWs as mere animals. They become humiliated whenever their weakness is exposed and it is vividly described in the act of colonel Kota and major Nakamura. The Japanese soldiers esteem ‘honour’ above all valuable things in the world. Contrarily, they dishonour themselves by committing the war crimes. The Japanese along with the psychological pain also endure the physical woes in the camps. They suffer from starvation, malnutrition, cholera and chronic ulcer and die as the Railway progress. They sacrifice their lives in vain, not knowing the hollowness in the Railway construction. They are tortured by their sergeant during the training sessions. Cruel beatings and punishments are given to them if they exhibit weakness during the practice.

The denouement of war literally frees the POWs, but psychologically traps them in their tormented world, resulting in war neuroses. They suffer from a psychic trauma due to the recurrent thoughts of war, humiliation, and guilt. This is the consequence of ‘shell shock’, a traumatic war neurosis. The symptoms of this neurosis is the repercussion of the war incidents, repetitive nightmares of war, uncontrollable aggressive outbursts, intense fear and anxiety, amnesia for the traumatic event etc. According to Kardiner, the war neurotic person has such symptoms, which are evident in the lives of Japanese POWs. Dorrigo Evans suffers from amnesia for the traumatic events. Though he recollects certain events he forgets most part of it. Since the trauma among the other POWs is immense, they commit suicide, become alcoholics. Their uncontrollable aggressive outbursts are seen when they testify against the war criminals. They are pre-occupied with war trauma in every minute of their lives. Their fear and anxiety are intense, that they doubt the possibility of living a happy life.

In accordance with Kardiner, “. . . the ‘bound’ cathexes of the ego . . . in the traumatic neuroses, . . . remained dammed up in the ego without the possibility of successful discharge, with the result that the most basic sensors-motor-perceptive functions associated with the ego were damaged or destroyed” (qtd. in Leys 53), the POWs conflict within the ego about the traumatic memories, hinders them in amalgamating with the society and their family. This continuous war within POWs, create a hole in Ego, where the Ego tries to withdraw or shrink back from the dangerous world. Thus the POWs after war are detached from the reality of the world and their family. Jimmy Bigelow’s alienation from his daughter and the world is due to this reason.

Therefore, they drink alcohol to let slip the traumatic memory of war, “Suddenly the beer was like fuel for a fire. They drank to make themselves feel as they should feel when they didn’t drink, that way they had felt when they hadn’t drunk before the war” (Flanagan 329). They become happy by remembering comic scenes and incidents in the POW camp. The soldiers who died in the war become alive in their talks. The POWs are thus torn from

the hitherto friendly world, because the trauma and its repetition destroy the optical pictures of reality. They develop nihilistic delusion, where they believe in the nonexistence of self or parts of self, or the world. They suspect the reality of relationships, the worthiness of living and the society. Dorrigo Evans also suspects, the concept of war hero and heroism, because war made them miserable and no man can be called a hero when he himself is miserable and pitiful. Jimmy Bieglow, one of the POWs shows excessive symptoms of 'shell shock'. He displays intense fear and anxiety, in protecting his children from the horror filled world, which no one prepares to confront.

The soldiers also suffer from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and combat neuroses. These both neuroses are similar in characteristics and symptoms. When a person is highly exposed to the war atmosphere resulting in personality disturbance is said to have Combat neurosis. PTSD is an anxiety disorder where people suffer from repeated recollection of the traumatic event vividly in their thoughts, images or dreams. PTSD is developed in people who have traumatic childhood experiences. It reawakens the unresolved conflicts that are repressed in the childhood along with the present traumatic events. Dorrigo suffers from PTSD, because of Oedipus complex. He experiences double trauma of war and love. This makes him indifferent and violent towards his family, and a nihilistic person towards the society. Freud states, "Trauma was thus defined in quasi-military terms as an effraction or breach in the shield, setting in motion every possible attempt at defense even as the pleasure principle itself was for the moment put out of action" (Leys 50). All the soldiers in the camp suffer trauma, since they cannot concentrate on the libidinal urge which helps them ventilate pain. But to the contrary Dorrigo effaces the trauma of war by contemplating on the memories of Amy. Though it is an incestuous love Flanagan places it as a ventilator to ventilate pain.

Allegorically the war between the Japanese and the British can be explained with the concept of Oedipus complex. Britain is the father, the law giver, for they are the colonizers. Japan is the son, since it is the colonized country, desperately trying to triumph over the world (Mother Earth). This desire of the Japanese emperor to conquer the world is repressed in the unconscious by ego, but activated by the Second World War. The ego represses this desire for it is irrational and no man has supreme power over the world, except for God. It is even crueler to possess that power by inflicting pain. Unfortunately the ego fails heeding to the desire, so the emperor turns against the Allied countries to gratify this desire, but is crushed by the British Empire (the superego). As a result, the emperor is punished and made conscious of his position by the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This punishment is given by the British (the superego) which with its authority, controls the desire of power (the id) and edifies the Japanese emperor in the right way.

The scope in Flanagan's NRDN is to enumerate how war develops enmity between unknown people, who does not have a personal, but political vengeance inflicted upon them. Flanagan satirises the empty pursuit of the political leaders for power, the hollowness of war and the futility in being a war hero. War is political, economic and does not show any concern for human beings. The political leaders are unmindful of the physical and



psychological pain of the people. Flanagan concentrates on the psychological problems of the POWs and the civilians in the novel. He focuses on how people, who are remote from war, are dragged into the scenario without their consent. He also emphasises on remembering people who suffered a lot in war, because in this fast moving world people forget things easily.

The most important fact the novel makes us to understand is the reality of war which cannot be distorted. War is inevitable and it has its own logic. Throughout the millennia people are used to war and many people have tasted its advantage, for in one way it is progressive. The war between Palestine and Israel, between America and Afghanistan, and the conflict in Sri Lanka are the examples which prove that war is unavoidable. These wars are neither fought with war ethics, nor with mercy for human lives. The novel highlights such crimes done by the Japanese over the POWs while building the railways. Because of the recurrence of war, people gradually understood the importance of survival. The POWs teach us in the novel how survival is important along with love and courage. Thus love and courage emancipate a man from the clutches of the past. Yet, not all people can free themselves from the recurrent memories of war.

In the novel, two characters depict different perspectives that people show in understanding the reality of war. Dorrigo Evans, till the end of the novel is trapped in the past memories of war in addition to his separation with Amy. This double trauma makes him a neurotic person. He always believes in his mother, who advises that the world is filled with horror but still he could not liberate himself from that trauma. Contrarily Jimmy Bieglow, one of the POWs sets himself free from this trauma of war by mitigating himself through nature, “His mind slowly distilled his memory of the POWs camps into something beautiful. . . . At the age of ninety-four he was finally a free man” (Flanagan 433). If Dorrigo has given importance to God in the place of his mother, he would have probably sought solace in God who will give sovereign peace beyond the understanding of human beings and would have died a peaceful death.

In order to remind people of these war victims, literary writers have written many novels, poems, and plays after the First World War and the Second World War, picturizing war. The literary writer like T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Henry Green and many others have written many literary works regarding war, its severity and its destruction. Most of the war novels in literature are analysed from the psychoanalytic point of view. They focus on the psychological wounds of the victims of war and war neuroses. *The Railway Man* by Eric Lomax is similar to Flanagan’s NRDN in the context of war and war neuroses. It is an autobiography written in the year 1995 after World War II. This novel also focuses about the sufferings of the POWs, who are forced to build the Thai-Burma Railways. The torture in the camp creates many psychological problems within Lomax, as an aftermath. Hence there is a wide scope for psychoanalysis in analysing war literature.

The cruelest impact of war memories are that they detach people from their family and make them strangers even to their beloveds. This is due to the psychological wounds caused by war. Waterson explicates this in detail as, “Traditional activities of family and

community life, work, and shared understanding are amputated, making it ever more difficult to escape the habitus of violence” (Waterson 26). The war combatants suffer from many psychological disorders like PTSD, combat neurosis, nihilistic delusion, and anxiety. These complications alienate them from ordinary life and society. Even then war is obligatory and enforced when it is needed. The question of why war is inevitable has no answer but is accepted. War heroes and political leaders are still praised and appreciated for saving the nation. Nevertheless the victims of war are forgotten. Therefore in war, more than the physical pain, the psychological pain is enormous. The focus of the thesis is mainly on the victims of war, their psychological pain, and the alienation caused by war. War, which cannot be encouraged but is unavoidable, disturbs the daily life of people by imposing psychological agony, which time cannot heal. It makes the everyday mundane life into a herculean task for these people. But this agony is cured when that war victim has faith in God, true love and a beautiful family.

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