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"We are the Victims of War": The Traumatic Recall in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

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Abstract

The paper stems from the premise that unusual stressful circumstances persuade an individual to accept and learn to live with the fluidity of identities and intense feelings of guilt and shame and their subsequent emotional tortures. Accordingly, the imprints of trauma in the war veterans are indelible and create a condition of moral injury. Moral injury is the acute mental stress experienced by a person who goes through any traumatic events that are detrimental to his own deeply held morals and values. This paper is a critical exploration of the moral injury and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder suffered by diverse characters, who are accused of war crimes in the novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. It also attempts to analyse the direct relationship between the spiritual crisis of war and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Keywords: Guilt; Moral Injury; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Trauma.

At the height of Second World War, Japan has decided to build the Siam-Burma railway for the military interventions. For the Japanese, the construction of the railway line was a matter of honour and pride. This railway project later came to be called Death Railway as it claimed the lives of many native labourers and prisoners of war of the Allied forces. The project came to an abrupt end in 1947 with the defeat of Japan in Second World War. Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2014, is a fictional account of the experiences of the camp where the prisoners of war are kept. It is a historical novel which poetically records the horrifying experiences of the Australian Prisoners of War in the Japanese labour camps on the Siam-Burma Railway Line. This paper attempts to analyse how the novelist poignantly

illustrates the devastating experiences of the prisoners during the World War. The novelist underlines that war is a crime against humanity in which both the oppressors and the victims are traumatised.

In her path breaking work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth explores the ways literature emphasizes the structure and impact of traumatic experiences. She highlights how literature entraps the readers in indirect traumatic experiences. Generally, a trauma narrative demonstrates how a traumatic event destabilises a normal human self. Caruth also pinpoints how trauma produces a dreadful conflict in the human psyche that distorts human identity. The reactions to traumatic events are universal and medically termed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.Post trauma and traumatic memories often produce long term consequences in the psychological life of wartime generations. Though all the major characters in the novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* undergotrauma, their experiences of traumatic haunting are not identical. The range and intensity of their trauma vary from unidimensional to multidimensional. The novelist illustrates the story of many who have been smouldering with guilt, pain and wounds, even though they have unleashed cruelty on others as part of the war. This article is a critical exploration of the moral turpitude and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder suffered by the different characters in the novel who are accused of war crimes. This research paper highlights how trauma, guilt and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder vitiate human relationships.

Kali Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma (*1996*)*, elucidates the term trauma as "a life-threatening event that displaces [one's] preconceived notions about the world" (15). The threat to life alters one's perceptions of the world. According to JudithHerman, trauma is a "threat to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (33). Both Tal and Herman underline the life-threatening nature of trauma. Elizabeth Waites conceptualizes trauma as "an injury to mind or body that requires structural repair" (22). The impact of trauma is often insidious and destructive; it is a distressing experience that shakes the mind and body of a human being. In this regard, Waitesexplains: ". . . a main effect of trauma is disorganization, a physical and/or mental disorganization that may be circumscribed or widespread," and this eventually leads to "fragmentation of self, shattering of social relationships, erosion of social supports" (92).Even after all the traumatic events are got over in the lives of the victims, their memories remain as indispensable part of personal history and identity.

All those who take part in the war go through very unusual living conditions. They have to witness and participate in many atrocities and annihilations. These uncommon and unpredictable experiences of their lives transform them completely. Therefore, guilt and shame are the characteristic features common among the war veterans. The negative involvements in the war and war related activities drive them to even more horrific mental conflicts after the war. Psychologists like Jinkerson and B. T. Litz argue that all those who took part in the wars would be enslaved to some kind of guilt and shame. As a reaction of guilt and shame, they go through a special situation called post-war moral injury. Thepsychiatrist Jonathan Shay coined the term moral injury based on a study of themilitary/veteran patients under observation for warzone dereliction. According to Shay, moral injury stems from the "betrayal of 'what's right' in a high-stakes situation by someone who holds power" (20). Moral injury is the mental stress experienced by a person going through any traumatic events detrimental to his deeply held morals and values. Sheila Frankfurt and Patricia Frazier define moral injury as a syndrome: "The moral injury syndrome was proposed to describe the constellation of shame and guilt-based disturbances that some combat Veterans experience after engaging in wartime acts of commission (e.g., killing) or omission (e.g., failing to prevent atrocities). The moral injury syndrome was proposed to be constituted of the PTSD symptoms of intrusive memories, emotional numbing, and avoidance, along with collateral effects such as self-injury, demoralization, and self-handicapping" (318). Victims and perpetrators of war crimes experience lastingpsychological, social and behavioural aberrations due to intense feelings of guilt and shame.They point out: "These experiences are labelled *transgressive acts* to identify them as potentially traumatic experiences distinct from the fear-based traumas associated with posttraumatic stress disorder" (318). This horrifyingly disturbing violent wartime experiences are later transformed into irrevocable imprints of trauma in an individual in which one has to accept and learn to live with the fluidity of identities with intense feelings of guilt and shame and their subsequent emotional tortures.

The novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* narrates the story of a group of people who have to experience the horrific aftermath of the war, much of what they did as part of the war. Set across the turbulent World War period of nearly 40 years, the novel revolves roundthe life of the central character doctor Dorrigo Evans. He is an Australian doctor-turned-soldier who is captured by the Japanese and thus becomes a prisoner of war (POW) during the period of World War II. The narrative goes through all the major events in the life of the hero from his im-

prisonment on the Thai-Burma Railway to his return home as a celebrated war hero. Though he is hailed as a national war hero and the champion of veteran causes, every day he is going through an intense experience of moral injury and a deep sense of guilt. During his service as a commanding officer of the prisoners of war, he often felt guilty for not being able to save their lives. Doctor Dorrigo Evans has a mind full of guilt during and after the war. Guilt is a subjective feeling of negative self-evaluation. Kubany and Watson, in "Guilt: Elaboration of a multidimensional model" (2003), defines guilt as "an unpleasant feeling with accompanying beliefs that one should have thought, felt or acted other differently" (53). The guilty past haunts him everywhere. Even when he becomes a celebrityas a war hero, he still feels guilt inside. In his old age, he reflects about life: "A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else" (3). He refers to the widening chasm between greatness and happiness.

The biggest guilt in Dorigo Evans's mind is related to Darky Gardiner's death. Darky Gardiner is fellow prisoner in the Japanese POW camp. He was a very active and brilliant young man who maintained good relations with the prisoners around him even in that most desperate time. When Darky Gardiner was cruelly punished by camp guards, Dorrigo rushedthere to help. At that moment, the Japanese CO made him an offer. If Dorrigo stopped interfering with the severe beating delivered to Gardiner that particular day, the CO agreed to give him quinine, a drug that could save other prisoners. Thus, Dorrigo sacrificed Darky for the medicine, and in the end Darky died. Although Dorrigo was trying to save others in the camp, his guilt over the murder of Darky Gardiner haunted him to the point of death. Later, after the war, when Dorrigo found that Darky was his own nephew, he was devastated with guilt and shame. A critical analysis of the novel proves that his failure to prevent the death of Darky Gardiner is the root cause of the moral injury in the life of Dorrigo Evans. The death remains a deep soul wound for his entire life which pierces his sense of morality and his relationship to society. After the event, Dorrigo transformed into an isolated man with guilt obsessions, who cannot open up to anyone. Though he cannot avoid the intrusive reexperiencing of events in the POW camp, he bears his trauma alone.

Gonna is another significant character in the novel who suffers from anguish, anger and alienation due to his war front activities. Gonna or Choi Sang-min was a Korean guard renowned for his brutality in the POW camp. He was only sixteen when he reached the POW camp. When general Kota found some POWs were missing from the Line, he placed all the blame to Darky Gardiner and ordered for a severe punishment as an example. Gonna had to reluctantly obey the orders of

his superiors. Moreover, when Dorrigo Evans interfered in the matter to save Gardiner, it infuriated Nakamura and he hit Gonna hard with the pick handleand gave the command to thrash the prisoner like that. Hence Gonna could not help Gardiner in that situation and he and his fellow guards became beating machines: "And the drumming went on and when the other guards had tired and stopped, still the Gonna went on, diligently, obediently, rhythmically beating Darky Gardiner with the pick handle" (296). Thus, Gonna is presented as a man who inflicts immense suffering to hundreds of prison guards.

Though Gonna is presented as a cruel hearted fellow, eventually the novelist unravels his traumatic childhood. He hails from a Korean family and in his early childhood, he was forced to work as a servant in a Japanese family. The dreadful treatment he received from that family was his first traumatic experience. He recollects the traumatic memory of Japanese Military camp:

> In Pushan they had slapped him because his voice was too low or his posture wrong, they had slapped him for being too Korean, they had slapped him to show how to slap others-as hard as he could. Choi Sang-min hated it. He wanted to run away, back to his home. But he knew that if he did, he would be punished, and, worse, his family would be punished. (348)

Thus, his inhuman behaviour at the POW camp is the repercussion of his traumatic experiences.He wants to get rid of his lifelong fear and inferiority through the cruel behaviour at the POW camp. There he simultaneously led the life of a perpetrator and a victim. After the war, Gonna suffers the intrusive recurring memories of POW camp. His traumatic memories are accompanied by an intense feeling of guilt. For a relief, he contemplates himself as a mere labourer worked for fifty Yen per month.He thinks that he has done everything as instructed to him.

The realisation that he unknowingly became part of a lot of crimes is a terrible burden for Gonna and a sense of meaninglessness overwhelmed him. Gonna intensely expresses various types of reactive disorders and PTSD symptoms are most evident in him. His mind is filled with guilt and revenge. The last moments of his life can be considered as an illustration of PTSD disorder:

> He fought with the guards when they came to take him to the gallows. He had seen a cockroach and wanted to kill it. …..Choi Sang-min screamed. He could still see the cockroach. He was given four phenobarbital tablets to steady his nerves, but his body

> was too excited and he vomited the pills straight back. Before the doctor gave him an injection of morphine, he managed to crush the cockroach beneath his boot heel. (350)

He desperately wants to experience a kind of joyous brutality by inflicting injury, pain and death on others. His irritability and aggressive behaviour is close to PTSD symptoms. Litz et al. (2009) describe moral injury as "the inability to contextualize or justify personal actions or the actions of others and the unsuccessful accommodation of these . . . experiences into pre-existing moral schemas" (705). Their contention is that moral injury is the damage done to human conscience which disrupts the mental health of the person. Moreover, it is a universal truth that a man tries desperately to justify even the crimes done in a particular situation of war before his own conscience. In the last moments of his life, he is obsessed with guilt, killing and the fifty Yen: "[he] heard the crashing noise of the trap door slamming down. Stop! he went to yell. What about my fifty-"(352). Until the last minute, he keeps insisting that all the work he did is for just fifty Yen. His desperate attempts to find a justification for his own actions indirectly indicates the moral injury of his unconscious mind.

In order to highlight the pangs of the internalised trauma of the human beings, Flanagan employs many types of subtle imagery. After the war, during his life in hiding, Nakamura, the Japanese Major, acquainted with a doctor named Kameya Sato. The greatest feature of this character was his refusal to wear the white coat, the very symbol of his profession. Apart from this eccentric habit, he was a very humble man who devoted his whole life to the cause of the people. Their acquaintance gradually grew into an intimacy. One evening their friendly conversation turned to a newspaper report of the day. It was about the punishments given to the Japanese doctors for conducting Vivisection of the live American airmen, without the use of anaesthetics. Nakamura vehemently discarded the news as "American lies!" (354). Sato reveals to him Japan's human experimentation programmeduring the World WarII. He discloses that at the time of war,he was working in Kyushu, one of the Japanese universities for doctors. He recollects the procedures of the Japanese doctors and scientists "to prove themselves worthy servants of emperor" (355). He narrates the dissection of enemy soldiers,without the use of anaesthetics, before death to enhance their medical knowledge:

> Before Professor Ishiyama began we all bowed towards the patients, as though it were a normal operation. May be that reassured him. Professor Ishiyama first cut into his abdomen and cut away the part of his liver, then sewed the wound up. Next, he removed the gall bladder and a section of his stomach. The American, who looked an intelligent and vital young man at the be-

> ginning, now looked old and weak. His mouth was gagged but he was quickly beyond any screaming. Finally, Professor Ishiyama removed his heart. It was still beating. When he put it on the scales the weights trembled. (356)

In his later life, he is possessed by the shuddering of the American's heart. In order to comprehend the magnitude of trauma from which he has been suffering, Sato equates that trembling of the American's heart to that of the strange sound at the end of an earthquake. He knows that the reason of the smile on the American airman's face in the operation theatre, just before the operation, is his trust in the white coat of the Doctors'. Though he admits that he too is a victim of war, he can never get rid of the traumatic memories that the white coathas evoked.

Major Nakamura is a Japanese officer, methamphetamine addict, in the POW camp. He is at the helm of the atrocities in the POW camp. In fact, he considers the railway line as a symbolof the Japanese spirit. He is very much obsessed with the Japanese concept of honour. In his prime youth he was never ashamed of having made the POWs work hard for the railway. The last part of the novel covers the retrospective meditations or reflections of this Japanese commander to overcome the guilt of his atrocious behaviour in the POW camp. After the war he is disillusioned with Japanese concept of honour. From the newspaper he understands that he is a wanted war criminal. He is introduced to Doctor Sato during the long and troubled hiding life. It is comforting for Nakamura to realize that during the war, Japanese doctors were more involved in inhuman activities than in the POW camps. He regains his lost self-esteem and regards himself as a more truthful human being. He tellshimself that he is a good man who did his duty and there is nothing to be ashamed of the crimes he committed in the POW camps as he too is the victim of the war.

Even in the midst of a peaceful family life, old memories haunt Nakamura. A closer look at his character reveals some differences from normal behaviour. Symptoms of PTSD is very obvious in his character. The personality disorder is most evident when his daughter is ill: "He almost seemed to his daughters to be of another world, misbuttoning shirts, forgetting to wear a belt, and concerned not to hurt spiders, which he would catch and take outside, or mosquitoes, which he would refuse to swat" (360). This hyper vigilance and psychic or emotional numbing is a clear symptom of PTSD. He alleges that all the crimes he committed are part of his job, but he cannot escape its guilt:

> He alone sensed the strangeness at the heart of his transformation into his idea of a good man. Was it hypocrisy? Was it atonement?Guilt? Shame? Was it deliberate or unconscious? Was it a lie

> or was it the truth?

All his life has been a perpetual struggle to conquer his traumatic memories and guilt. He istrying to forget old memories and determined to "make it a rule to avoid any contact with his old comrades" (379). In his later life he is trying to do only good and live well. Even in the phase of cancer, he faces the illness with much tranquillity and comfort.

Though Nakamura always tries to establish the goodness in him, he cannot avoid the strange feeling of being embraced by something monstrous. He strongly experiences the PTSD symptoms in him. He always carries overwhelming psychic burdens and it eats him mentally and physically. He equates the growth of cancer in him to the growth of his traumatic memories:

> He rubbed his neck, where the new bump had grown even that day, or so it seemed to Nakamura, for he believed he could feel the lump growing within him every hour of every day and every minute of every hour, eating him up. He tried, of course, not to feel it. He could with an effort not think about it and focus his mind instead on what concerned him more and more: the war, for that too was growing within him. (390)

He suffers from recurrent intrusive memories of the POWs miserable life in the camp.

Flanagan brilliantly employs the subtle images to project the intrusive thoughts of Nakamura. Towards the end of his life, he understood that: "… he was possessed of a shame that was also a terror. The things he thought right and true had all been wrong and false, and he with them" (391). When he has gone through a psychic breakdown, novelist projects the imagery of frozen monsters. On his way to Tomokawa's house, Nakamura sees many frozen monsters displayed in the town as part of annual snow festival. When he meets Tomokawa,who was also with him in the Siam Burma Railway project and POW camp, old memoriesbegins to haunt him. In the form of frozen monsters, intrusive memories of the crimes of hidden, frozen past terribly appears before him: "All he could think of was how, beyond his vision, frozen monsters loomed over the city, the Tomokawas', frozen monsters beneath which he would travel going back to the airport. He realized Tomokawa was talking to him and he tried to concentrate, but the monsters seemed to be in the room now" (389). Thus, hisself-protective vigilance begins to crumble down. He realized his helplessness: "His idea of his own goodness, though, was becoming harder and harder to hold on to" (393). The western arm chair of Tomokawa's house is another brilliant image for

forcefully hidden traumatic experiences. While "sitting in it [he] felt like being embraced and smothered by something monstrous" (382). While sitting in the chair he cannot deny his past and he suffers from horrific flashbacks and intrusive recollections: "For a moment he thought he smelt DDT and saw many things: Sato looking up from the *go* board and about to say something, lice fleeing from a dead boy's body, a man less than a man crumpling in the mud of a jungle clearing" (394). He can even feel "his body was trembling as he imagined the hospital scales had once trembled when the American's heart was placed on them" (394). No matter how hard he triesto live a normal life after the war, he cannot get rid of the old traumatic memories. In the work *Studies in Hysteria* (1955), Freud and Breuer observe that the memories of traumatic events have more traumatic effect than that of the events. All the characters in the novel are unable to share their traumatic experience, which inflict lifelong harm to their conscience. Since they are very reluctant to share their life in the POW camp, a talking cure or abreaction never happens to them. The post war life of the major characters underlines the notion that the psychological pain of a repressed traumatic event is understood only after a latency period. All the memories that lie dormant without being able to say anything to anyone would inflict severe psychological pain. In this regard, Freud and Breuer observe:

> We may reverse the dictum "cessante causa cessateffectus" (when the cause ceases the effect ceases) and conclude from these observations that the determining process (that is, the recollection of it) continues to operate for years—not indirectly, through a chain of intermediate causal links, but as a directly releasing cause—just as psychical pain that is remembered in waking consciousness still provokes a lachrymal secretion long after the event. Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences. (7)

Thus, the memories of repressed traumatic experiences filled with profound guilt and shame remain in their psyche as a pain until death.Although the memories may never be narrated or identified clearly, they actlike a tumour in the conscience that wounds every individual self. In the POW camp, when a discussion arose on deciding whether to keep RabbitHendricks'drawing book of the war, Bonox Baker demanded that the book should be preserved. He argues:"Memory is the true justice, Sir (243)." But Dorrigo, believes the memories can be "the creator of new horrors" (243). Though, Dorrigo Evans was then unaware of the impact of traumatic memories that would last a lifetime, it happened accordingly.

The novel abounds in multitude of characters who are destined to live a

dreadful life in one of the dark chapters of history. A critical reading of the novel validates that living with dreadful hurt of the experience is ultimately incommunicable and a traumatic event has the potential to transform human mindset and human behaviour. Humans who are exposed to traumatic events that disrupt their deeply held moral values are prone to experience severe distress and behavioural problems known as moral injuries. The novel cautiously reflects on the impact of war on the lives of survivors shows how their lives have turned into an abyss of different emotions like agony, love, regret, panic, terror, guilt and loneliness In this novel,Richard Flanagan stunningly maps this sense of moral dissonance and its consequential soul-destroying guilt. All the major characters like Doctor Dorrigo Evans, Gonna, Major Nakamura, and Doctor Kameya Sato are all living through unbearable trauma. The moral conflicts and mental trauma they experience are exceptional rather than mundane and they highlight the directionality of guilt and Post-Traumatic Stress in relationships.

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