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

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Abstract:

The paper aims to study the literary representation of war in Richard Flanagan's Man Booker award winning novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and critically analyze it. A native of Tasmania, Australia, Flanagan brought the literature of the country to a spotlight. His contribution to Australian literature is well acclaimed. The novel portrays the life story of Dorrigo Evans, a fallacious war hero, and survivor of the infamous Burma 'Death Railway'. The novel signifies man's triumph over cruel destiny.

Keywords: POWs (Prisoner of Wars), Death Railway

Richard Miller Flanagan, one of the finest of the Australian writers of contemporary fiction, is hailed as a prolific writer. He has written extensively on literature, environment, art and politics. In 1998, his film, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, was nominated for the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. In 2008, he won the John Curtin Prize for Journalism for his essay *Gunns Out of Control* which was written upon the biggest hardwood wood chipper in the World. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is Flanagan's sixth novel and winner of the 2014 Man Booker Prize. His earlier five novels also have won accolades for his artistic genius.

The title of the novel is inspired by Matsuo Basho's haiku, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. It took twelve years for Flanagan to finish the novel with many times redrafting it. The novel is a saga of a war hero who is flawed and guilt ridden. It exposes the shocking and shameful memories of a disgraceful construction of a railway connecting Bangkok and Rangoon called the Thai-Burma Railway. Also known as the Burma-Siam Railway or the 'Death Railway', it is a 415-kilometer railway between Ban Pong, Thailand and Thanbyuzayat, Burma. In 1943, during the World War II, it was built by the imperial rule of Japan to support its forces in Burma. The purpose was to attack the British in India and to establish itself as a colonial power. The 'Death Railway' is said to have been completed in just one year with around 13,000 POWs and 100,000 native labourers. The construction claimed the lives of more than 12,000 allied POWs. Lieutenant Colonel E. E. 'Weary' Dunlop was an outstanding, well-known personality and POW of the Thai-Burma Railway. He is known for his constant, untiring efforts to revive the lives of the POWs. With his physical and moral valor, he emerged as a leader among the POWs. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* essays the life story of the protagonist, Alwyn "Dorrigo" Evans, largely based on Colonel 'Weary' Dunlop's life. Evans is presented as an Australian officer-in-charge of the J-Force, a group of thousands of Prisoners of Wars working for the ill-famed 'Death Railway'. The book is

dedicated to Flanagan's father, Archie Flanagan, who was one of the 60,000 allied prisoners of war surviving the project of the 'Death Railway' and was acknowledged as the 'prisoner number 335'.

There were estimated more than 140,000 white prisoners in the Japanese prisoner of war camps. Half of them died due to starvation, work, punishments and diseases that were incurable as there were no medicines to treat. In the prisoner camps, as Dorrigo Evans recalls, the condition was horrible with life looking as an abject thing with meager meals to eat. The prisoners were made to work day and night to construct the 260-mile railroad by hand. It was termed as the "most notorious engineering project of the World War II". In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Richard Flanagan's illustration and elaborate storyline present the minute details of the 'Death Railway' project and exposes the cruelty rendered to the POWs. They had to survive in the worst of conditions. The dreadful war project had taken its toll and is said to have claimed more than 12,000 allied POWs during the construction which included people from many nationalities. Flanagan is successful in presenting a grim and merciless image of cruel destiny in the novel. It illustrates a vivid and dark picture of one of the darkest episodes of World War II.

Interspersed with memories Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* presents a narrative which moves back and forth with Dorrigo Evans as he recollects his past and comes back to the present, delineating love and war as a counterpart to each other. With very few surviving among the prisoners of wars, Evans is fortunate to be one of them. His survival grants him heroic status and is worshipped as a war hero, but his guilt-ridden heart makes him realize his loss as, "He's just had more success living than dying". The failure in continuing to live on after surviving death is common in all the survivors of war. Like any war novel, Flanagan's novel also possesses themes of survival, fraternity, totality and interminability of violence. The characters of the novel present the gory details of war. The survivors recall their experiences and ponder over their failed actions for which they survived and their fellowmen embraced death. Their guilt never allows them to rest in peace. War had always inflicted physical, emotional and psychological impact on soldiers. More than the physical injuries, the emotional and psychological scars last lifetime. The psychological disorders associated with wars – loud noises, adverse situations, tortures, scarcity of food and resources, pain and agony make soldiers more aggressive, greedy and selfish. Their extreme behaviour is the result of their adverse environment.

The story of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* outlines the disastrous and deadly environment of the prison camps as well as the worst living conditions of the POWs. The core of the novel is its depiction of the sufferings and death of thousands of POWs and local labours. The episodic illustration of the beating of Darky Gardiner by the Japanese officers and his eventual death in a 'sewage trench' depicts ultimate brutality. The inability to react and oppose the cruelty inflicted by the 'masters' upon the tortured POWs make the helpless and mute spectators witness the sickening situation and realize their sense of nakedness. Their powerless, feeble and weak image stands low against the powerful and barbaric Japanese officers who stand for their rigid system. Flanagan doesn't hesitate to point out the

intense patriotism which the Japanese bear in their heart. Their allegiance to their rulers and the imperial system are presented in the characters of Colonel Kota and Major Nakamura. Major Nakamura is among the more desirable of the Japanese judging against the rest of the officers who are drugged and induced to become rude and unsympathetic to the captives. Nakamura is methamphetamine addict and is pledged to serve the taut and rigid imperial rule. The emperor-based ideology of Japan during World War II stood resolutely united against the Western confront. Japan was not powerfully equipped enough to undertake the war against the United States. The construction of the 'Death Railway' was an extent of the strategy to sustain its armed forces in the Burma operation of World War II after they had seized control of the colony from the British authority.

With Dorrigo Evans reading and re-reading Tennyson's *Ulysses*, the heroic spirit of the Australian doctor becomes crystal clear. Evans draws a similarity between himself and Tennyson's war hero 'Ulysses' - "to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield". The unlawful love affair of Evans with his uncle's young wife, Amy, sustains him to endure the adversities in the camps. His feelings linger alive in the most horrible of situations because of his love for Amy.

"...and he thought of her head and her face and her body, the red camellia in her hair, but as hard as he tried now, he could not remember her face."

Sometimes the physical pain is lesser than the mental pain. Flanagan's Dorrigo Evans divulges his literariness further when he says to himself, "Dante's First Circle" as he walks out of the 'Ulcer Hut' and goes around the camps as part of his morning schedule round. His designating classical names to the ailments of the POWs with "Via Dolorosa" turned into "Dolly Rose" and then "Dolly" even in the midst of despair, reveals his literary compassion and psyche.

Amidst war as its background, Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, recalls the consequences it generates upon the lives of the soldiers implicated in it. It leads them to ineptness in retaining their associations and failure to endure the trauma even after surviving. The trauma of war remains embedded in their brain which further makes them averse to blend and adjust in a social context. The feeling of solitude and remorse of survival while others died, make them recluse in their own world. Their inability to deal with normal situation prevents them from regaining their mental status and bond with their close relations. In the novel, Dorrigo Evans is a survivor of the war but fails to make his marriage successful and is incapable to show his affections even to his children. Contrast to that, postwar Major Nakamura develops into a loving and gentle father as well as a husband. But both are troubled by their past deeds and events. Hallucination is common in war survivors, who constantly are reminded of death and its inevitability.

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* emerges as a contemporary classic of war fiction. It brings together the totality of war and the associated situations. The novelist's projection of life before the war camps, in the camps, and after survival is an assimilation of wonderful words mixed with contradictory emotions. The inhumane

behaviour of the Japanese captors and Korean guards and the tortures inflicted by them on the captives are memorably represented in the novel indicating despair and terror.

"What was a prisoner of war anyway? Less than a man, just material to be used to make the railway, like thesteel rails and dog spikes."

Like any war fiction, Flanagan also delves deep into inhumane brutality and horrific descriptions of the POW camps but manages to bring out the romantic side in the life of a soldier. The romantic life of Dorrigo Evans is revealed with his affair with Amy, his marriage with good and lawful Ella and his other love affairs. On one point the gripping large-scale details of the camp, the prisoners, and the captors make the novel a terrific war novel on the other hand the tragic love fills-up the minds of the readers. The novelist's description of Dorrigo Evans treating a dying soldier with no resources and medical equipment presents the abject life of POWs in a POW camp.

"A severe, untreated ulcer left a thin strip of intact skin down the outer side of the calf, the rest of the leg being a huge ulcer from which poured offensive, grayish pus." The use of "Joseph Roger's pocket knife", a "home-made" bamboo 'catheter' as medical equipment make the narrative all the more horrifying. With war and limited resources, the unhealthy lives of the POWs are always in danger of infection and sepsis. Sickness spreads quickly in such filthy environment. Flanagan skillfully sketches and represents the picture of worst healthcare and hygiene of the camps which are major contributing factors to the poor living conditions of POWs. Poignancy never leaves the scene, with events after events, plots after plots, the story constructed and recreated speaks of pathos, pain and misery mixed with wretchedness. Barbed wires, guarded towers, wooden barracks with small areas for every POWs, piled up corpses slipping down and many more descriptions depict the constant, violent struggle for survival. People outlive the pain but the guilt never goes and the scars remain life-long. The descriptions of the POWs suffering from ulcers, scabies, starvation, gangrene, lice and cholera add horrors to the narrative which is otherwise beautiful and well-constructed.

At the zenith of the novel, Evans recalls the horrors, hungers, tortures, diseases observed by him and realizes,

"he discovered with an immense sadness that pursuing the past inevitably leads to greater loss."

When Rabbit Hendricks dies of cholera, from his possessions a sketch book is retrieved. The pyre-maker insists to keep it as a future record and to remember of whatever happened in the camps. Dorrigo Evans persuades him to burn it saying,

"Everything's forgotten in the end, Bonox. Better we live now."

He further says,

"Do you know the poem, Bonox? It's by Kipling. It's not about remembering. It's about forgetting – How everything gets forgotten."

As pointed out by Flanagan himself,

"more corpses than there are words in my novel".

He further puts it,

"that all life is only allegory and the real story is not here - said it was like the long autumn of a dying world."

With well-phrased and suitable words, Richard Flanagan is successful in creating a perfect war-novel. The presentation of the camp life is authentic and original. As Flanagan quotes,

"I grew up, as did my five siblings, as children of the Death Railway."

He drew inspiration from his father's life and his father, one of the POWs of the 'Death Railway', satisfied his curious mind. Flanagan used his father's experience and sketched them in the novel representing the heinous aspects of war. The laws of the war are violated every-time, every day making life as abject as possible.

"the nature of mud, the smell of rotting skin bone when a tropical ulcer has opened up, what sour rice tasted like for breakfast".

Michael Williams quotes on Richard Flanagan,

"He's sanguine about questions of success and recognition, strikes me as a man whose writing is intensely hopeful and deeply understanding about the nature of despair."

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