

**Scars Of The Mind: A Psychological Approach To Richard  
Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North***

**K. SUJITHA**

Reg. No: 19213214012003

Doctoral Scholar

Research Centre for English

St. Jerome's College, Nagercoil.

*(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)*

**Dr. M. LEEMA ROSE**

Supervisor and Head

Research Centre for English

St. Jerome's College, Nagercoil

*(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)*

**Abstract**

Scars on body fades by time but scars on mind can never be forgotten. The emotional effects of war on prisoners of war can be difficult and it seems unfair to the family of the veterans. Post-traumatic stress disorder in prisoners often makes them recall and re-experience them of the trauma. War had thus been proven to be a scarring experience for the prisoners of war. Intense experiences shape and change those who experience them. Torture during interrogation often includes methods that do not physically assault the body or cause actual physical pain and yet entail severe psychological pain and suffering and profoundly disrupt the senses and personality. Richard Flanagan in his Man Booker Prize novel *The Narrow road to the Deep North* describes how his father and other prisoners of World War II suffer in the hands of the dominant Japanese. The cruelty of them is more intense that the veterans could not forget their experience even after the end of World War II. This paper attempts a psychological reading to reveal the impacts of war which stays eternally on the minds of the veterans, and also expose the brutality of the Japanese government.

**Keywords:** Post-trauma, psychology, torture, interrogation, veteran, eternal, brutality.

War is always destructing. War helps nothing and nobody. War is generally characterised by extreme violence, aggression, destruction, and mortality. Even though the war is always there right from the ancient period it only results in massive civilian suffering and other casualties,. There is no stopping for the war. War is considered as the end for all the problems. But the people who start war does not realise that it is the beginning of destruction of human world as well as natural world. The Nigerian poet John Pepper Clark says, the best way to win the war is to prevent it.

War does not only affect the people who involve in the war, it also affects the people who are connected with them. War's impact is so intense that the veterans could not come out of it up till now. As the war not only affects them physically besides it also affects them emotionally. And that is why the scar cannot be disregarded as the scar is too deep in the minds of the prisoners that affect them psychologically.

Psychology involves the study of the mental characteristics or attitude of a person or a group. It looks for the underlying cause of behaviour and the mental process involved, it also emphasis on the causes and consequences on the behaviour. The impact of the war on people is so devastating that they affect them psychologically. Especially World War II acquired millions of lives and left those who outlived to suffer psychologically.

In addition to physical problems caused by war, emotional problems could also be brought on by battle. The effects of war on soldiers often involve emotional and psychological issues, as well as obvious physical injuries that result from combat. Many soldiers suffer a condition known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. PTSD is the result of severe trauma. Soldiers experiencing this condition often have flashbacks in which they relive moments of terror. The families of the soldiers are affected by war and may experience secondary traumatization. Children with one or more parent deployed may experience nightmares and anxious behavior caused by constant worry. People who are living in areas that are affected by war are the innocent victims of combat, suffering physically and psychologically. These people can lose loved ones as collateral damage and experience the terror of battle first-hand. If homes are lost, many of these people are forced to become refugees until their country is rebuilt.

In Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North*, he tells about his father's story, who was a survivor of Burma Death Railway. The novel is about the life story of Dorrigo Evans, a flawed war hero and survivor of the Death Railway; it has been hailed by *The Australian* as 'beyond comparison... An immense achievement' and 'a masterpiece' by *The Guardian*. It won the 2014 Man Booker Prize.

In *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* Dorrigo Evans and other prisoners of war undergo indefinite torture by the Japanese. Based on the biography of Flanagan's father, Archie Flanagan who worked in the Death Railway, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* portrays the sufferings of Australian prisoners of war tortured by the Japanese in the same Thai-Burma Railway. Flanagan has dedicated the book to his father *san byaku san ju go*(335).

The story extended beyond the instinctive pain, is that it brings to life the attention paid to men as individuals, their pettiness and their courage, their acts of betrayal and affection and their efforts to cling to trappings of civilizations no matter how slight and futile. Pain is one of the most powerful weapons of war. Dorrigo must select the healthiest prisoners for that day's crushing labour. But his men "like a muddy bundle of broken sticks" (218) are starving, suffering from cholera and in the never-ending rain; their ulcer-covered bodies are rotting away. The ceaseless torture described is strikingly uncreative: no water boarding and no electrodes. Instead the prisoners are simply kicked to death or beaten with bamboo poles to bloody mush. Dorrigo must strive to save each one knowing that he cannot rescue any of them and that their deaths in the jungle in service to an insane ambition mean nothing and will quickly be forgotten.

In this novel Flanagan offers a rich insight into how the Burma Railway has claimed the lives of Australian prisoners of war even after they have survived the camps. In the construction of the railway, the Australians are not the only prisoners but Major Nakamura, the Japanese commander is also a prisoner of the project. Dorrigo is the leader for Australians and he has to report the number of prisoners who are capable of work. The Australian prisoners are tortured by the Japanese commander. Some are even beaten to death.

The novel's background is World War II, in which the fall of Singapore leads to the surrender of Australians to the Japanese. "When one empire ends with the fall of Singapore and another arises . . ." (23). The Japanese have taken it as a mission to build a 415km railway linking Thailand and Burma by slave labour that included more than 60,000 allied prisoners of

war. The first train which travelled the completed railway was steam locomotive C 5631. At present the train is preserved in the museum but those who rendered their lives for the railway are forgotten.

When the prisoners started to work in the Line, their first job is to clear the teak forest. The Speedo which “. . . meant that there were no longer rest days, that work quotas went up, and up again, that shifts grew longer and longer” (47-48) begins in the Line, so the prisoners have to work seventy days without rest. They should work in two shifts both day and night. At first the prisoners were always singing and whistling but gradually torture and starvation falls upon them.

The prisoners have only hand tools and no machinery. They struggle for survival without food and rest when cholera strikes situation becomes worse, with no medicines, not enough axes and saws to clear the jungle and not enough coke for the forge to sharpen them. The prisoners die due to cholera and lack of food but there is need for more prisoners. Darcy's intense suffering is one of the most painful portrayals of the prisoners of war. Darcy's ulcer had spread from his big toe. Darcy is too weak to walk. His feet stagger. He rests for a while. Colonel Kota along with Goanna, a Korean guard plans for inspection of the work in the railway line. Seeing Darcy resting they kick him and asks Goanna to make Darcy kneel with his head bowed. To him it is waste to feed the prisoner who is going to die. Colonel Kota doesn't behead Darcy because Darcy's neck seems to be screaming. Darcy senses his death for the first time. The guards kick him and point him to the direction of the camp. “Darcy Gardiner pulled himself to his knees and hands, and like a weary dog turned around and started to crawl before the guard changed his mind” (261).

One day Darcy is taken out of the hospital because he is one of the men missing the Line. Darcy is dragged to the parade ground by two guards and beaten by the Goanna and two other guards. The prisoner are made to watch Darcy's torture when the Goanna throws a teak log at Darcy's head and scooped him in a fireman's lift and beats him repeatedly. Later Darcy's drowned in the mud which is filled with shit.

During the war, the prisoners of war were exposed to a lot of stress, confusion, anxiety, pain and hatred. They are no longer truly men, they are barely human. The trauma of their experiences in the camp or their physical abilities has shattered their lives. War changed them forever. The violence, the injuries and the heavy destructions result in distress. Their

homesickness can lead to intense feelings of solitude. Their trauma brings them mental insecurity.

Flanagan in his talk with Dwyer Murphy about the Death Railway, family history, and the trouble with empathy, he points out that the atrocities meted out to more than quarter of a million of local and prisoners of war labour, resulting in carnage and misery beyond all measure and the death of over 100,000 and 200,000 during the construction of the Thai-Burma Railway is more than those who died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “ it’s one of those terrible human tragedies, the essence of which is incommunicable” (3). Though the war ends, the consequences of the war is terrible.

When the Allies won World War II, the Japanese were captured as war criminals. Nakamura has now become a Class B war criminal and leads a pathetic life. He satisfied his hand-to-mouth existence by petty thieving and black marketing. Goanna, the Korean guard is captured as a prisoner in Changi after the war. He is imprisoned for the murder of Darky Gardiner. When he is tortured by the Americans, he recalls how he tortured and enjoyed killing prisoners of war.

Coming to the prisoners of war after their return to their home, in the process of establishing a personal identity and constructing new values, most veterans had to deal with rejections and criticisms by a non-accepting society. As they re-emerge into civilization they struggle to establish a personal identity or a place in society. And so they feel even more isolated and unappreciated and exploited and they find no supportive groups to find a way.

Exposure to the war left lasting psychological effects in most of the veterans. War affects the veterans thoughts, emotions and mind. The veterans struggle to forget the painful memories and traumatic experiences. Flashbacks remind them of the war’s stress, confusion and frustration, thus affecting their lives and families well after the war had ended. They never could have the power to let it go.

Upon the veterans return to the states, many exhibited significant psychiatric symptoms. These range from difficulty sleeping to vivid flashbacks, and are now recognized as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD was the term used after 1980 to explain the effects of war on veterans and was later used outside the military to describe the impact of a traumatic event on an

individual. The Post-traumatic stress disorder is characterised by symptoms like nightmares, feelings of detachment, irritability, sleeplessness and difficulties in concentrating. Women have an increased vulnerability to the psychological consequences of war. Despite their vulnerability, women's resilience under stress and its role in sustaining their families has been recognized.

Many individuals struggled in trying to achieve self-unity which led to PTSD. The returning veteran need social support, affection, and a positive welcoming from his community in order to work through the war experience with his family and friends, this led to loneliness and alienation and sometimes complete hatred of himself. Veterans often needed long-term care owing to the physical and psychological impact of war.

Treatment is the key for veterans and their families to recover from trauma and mental health issues. In a survey of veterans suffering from PTSD, almost 80% wanted their families to be more involved in their recovery process, highlighting the need for spouses, children and other family members to stand with them. During their service, they may feel alone and isolated from their efforts of the entire family to ensure this feeling doesn't persist even after the veterans have come home.

**Work Cited:**

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