



Imprisoned Memories, Poetic Escapes: Trauma and Testimony in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

S. Gayathri

Assistant Professor PG department of English St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science (Autonomous)

Affiliated to Annamalai university Cuddalore-607001, Email: gayathrimarsh@gmail.com

Abstract:

Memories constitute a significant place in human experiences, especially for people who endured the horrific side of war. This paper examines how fragments of memory shape and re-define the protagonist's identity across his lifetime in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. This novel is structured around the fragmented memories of the narrator's experiences which function not just as a means of returning to the past but also act as a self-interrogation, often obstructing the protagonist's ability to negotiate the possibilities of the present. Memory operates simultaneously as testimony and as burden, entangling the subject in cycles of trauma and retrospection. Through his father's first-hand experience, Flanagan achieves a heightened authenticity that extends beyond conventional war literature, situating it within the broader discourse of memory, trauma, and identity formation. This paper also underscores how those disillusioned memories are often intertwined with the aesthetic beauty of poetry, which predominantly serves to heal the psychological wounds that the war imprints on several characters' lives.

Keywords: Death Railway, Non-Linear Narration, Poetic escapism, fragmented memory, psychological trauma

1 Introduction

Prison literature is defined as a corpus of literary narratives documented by writers who are in prison, prisoners' camps, or concentration camps. They produced various genres while serving imprisonment in different places, ranging from autobiographical touches and moments of self-realization to confessional discourse. However, prison narratives do not solely represent physical confinement; rather, they explain the psychological, metaphorical journeys of a person, conveying deep aesthetic expressions. Joseph Brodsky, in an article titled "The Writer in Prison," argues that:

It's not that prison makes you shed your abstract notions. On the contrary, it pares them down to their most succinct articulations. Prison is, indeed, a translation of your metaphysics, ethics, sense of history and what not into the compact terms of your daily deportment. The most effective place for that is of course solitary, with its reduction of the entire human universe to a concrete rectangle permanently lit by the 60-watt luminary of its bulb. Under which you revolve in pursuit of your sanity. After a couple of months of that, the solar system is compromised thoroughly, and if you are a poet, you may end up with a few decent lyrics under your belt because pen and paper are seldom available to a prisoner.

(Brodsky, 1996)

Prison life may confine a man but cannot imprison his thoughts and ideas. Much historical evidence suggests that the best writing of many intellectuals was written during their hard times in prison. However, while the confined life restricts a man's body, his creativity and thought process remain untouched. For example, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the celebrated poets of Urdu, composed his famous poem while he was in prison. In one of his iconic verses, he writes:

*What if my pen and paper have been snatched away?
I have dipped my fingers in the heart's blood,
What if my lips are sealed?
I've lent my tongue to each link in the chain*

(Faiz, 1987)

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* can certainly be called a prime piece of prison narrative. Although Flanagan himself did not experience confinement, he drew inspiration from his father's firsthand experience as a Prisoner of War (POW), utilizing the structural paradigms of containment literature to make the story deeply realistic and believable (Flanagan, 2013). A compelling dimension of the novel is Flanagan's seamless integration of historical fact and fiction. Though the storyline is situated around the period of the Second World War, the author's creative use of language makes readers visualize the events as if they are happening in the present. This story captures the psychological trauma of prisoners of war under their captors' leadership. One of the gripping literary gaps to examine is whether memory is something that actively recollects past incidents, or if contemporary writers use

memory as an acting agent to set new narratives for modern readers. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the novel features Dorrigo Evans serving as a military surgeon (Flanagan, 2013). The novel uncovers two primary dimensions: one represents his horrible life on the line, and the other explores its lasting aftermath and impacts on his personal life. In the present, he is highly viewed as a recognized surgeon, but in his heart, he goes through profound psychological difficulties. Flashbacks recount his early life in Tasmania, where he lived a reckless life with his friends and family. Throughout the story, his mind is highly haunted by the memory of his affair with Amy, who unfortunately was his uncle's wife (Flanagan, 2013). Despite his hard struggles and contemplation, he could not restrain his love affair with her, and it continued even after his wedding to his wife, Ella. Amy constantly remains his source of a dark past and inspiration to lead his life during the unhappy environments he endures for the rest of his life.

2 Memory as a Metaphorical Road to the Past

Often, prison writing is considered a tool for journeying into the past. This type of memory writing serves as a vehicle for personal growth and self-reflection (Dewey et al., 2019). Throughout the protagonist's narration, readers encounter the polyphonic voices of several characters, including the colonial captors who inflicted harshness upon the prisoners. This recollection of horrid experiences allows the characters to reminisce about haunting memories. For many incarcerated characters, reviewing past memories becomes a favorite act of cherishing and reflecting on their own actions. In a way, it offers solace for some, while for others, it serves as a channel to heal their wounded souls. In *The Prison Community*, sociologist Donald Clemmer claims that the incarceration experience is neither ordinary nor natural, consisting instead of humiliating experiences an individual must endure (Clemmer, 1940). Various parts of the story recount the horrible experiences faced by the prisoners:

Starvation stalked the Australians. It hid in each man's every act and every thought. Against it they could proffer only their Australian wisdom which was really no more than opinions emptier than their bellies... a grain was so much bigger now than a continent, like sombreros over their emaciated faces and their empty dark eyes, eyes that already seemed to be little more than black-shadowed sockets waiting for worms. And still the dead kept on accumulating
(Flanagan, 2013, 50)

In the post-memorial framework of the story, the life of the POWs is reduced to "scabies-ridden bodies and groggy guts," "fevered heads and foul, ulcerated legs," and "perennially shitting arses" (Flanagan, 2013, 48). One of the intriguing subplots running parallel to the main plot is Dorrigo's unrestrained love for Amy. Discovering that she was his uncle Keith's wife shocks him and alters the rest of his life. The affective structure of Dorrigo's relationship with Amy yields its ambivalence to the visceral imprint of memories he associates with his war experience. Apart from the recollection of events, the character's body and senses serve to produce a colorful tapestry of memories. The memory of Amy does not evoke only the bodily pleasure of their union; the same body remembers her sign of adultery, her visceral pain during an abortion, and the future bloodshed of the war. Poetry becomes the true source of the memory events throughout the story. Several characters recite famous lines from various poems as signs of road memory, including characters like Dorrigo, Nakamura, and Darky Gardiner, who cite poetic lines to justify or cope with their actions. In one utterance, Dorrigo exemplifies how forgetting events while remembering the past is a core part of memory's role by citing Kipling's "hymn about how everything gets forgotten" (Flanagan, 2013, 243). This links directly with how he forgets the memory of Amy, of whose "face he could remember nothing" (Flanagan, 2013, 206), but whose sensual imprint haunts him in Burma: "His world beyond here has shrunk to her. Not Ella. Her voice, her smile, her throaty laugh, the smell of her asleep" (Flanagan, 2013, 203).

Trauma is the next key ingredient that plays an essential role in representing multiple layers of distress underlying the anxieties of prisoners' lives. More than serving as a mere narrational discourse, trauma functions like an active character in its own framework throughout the story, which is a common occurrence in prison narratives. Thus, this story marks the same spirit from a deep psychological perspective, aligning with the traditional representation of trauma as painful, recurring episodes. Prison life under detention or incarceration causes a heavy mental impact. The repercussions of trauma often blur the boundaries between truth and falsehood, original and illusory, as well as between recollecting and forgetting. This feature is highly evident in the story when Dorrigo, recollecting life as a commander in the POW camp, finds his mind strikingly drawn back to the ulcer camp:

As he came close to the ulcer hut, Dorrigo was enveloped by the stench of rotting flesh... the stench was now different, once more growing stronger and also sharper, so foully pungent that Dorrigo's eyes were watering. Rows of naked men lay like stick insects dying after some strange swarming, so many cicada husks rising and falling on the woven bamboo, lying not parallel but at strange angles to one another
(Flanagan, 2013, 266)

Even after returning from the war, he is chased by reporters to share his first-hand experiences. The probing questions kindle the painful memories his heart has carried through the years. The recollection of these unpleasant memories prompts his shocking reply to a question about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

Once perhaps, the journalist said. But twice? Why twice. They were monsters. Dorrigo Evans said. You have no comprehension. The Journalist asked if the women and children were monsters too? And their unborn children? It was hard to remember
(Flanagan, 2013, 19)

This passage swiftly captures how extreme psychological suffering can erode one's capacity to uphold humanistic values and blur moral boundaries. Recent studies confirm that imprisonment has a variety of negative effects on mental health and well-being both during and after incarceration (Liebling and Maruna, 2005). As psychologist Craig Haney puts it, "prisons are fraught with danger, dehumanization, and deprivation, and are pervaded by all the negative emotions that those things engender" (Haney, 2001, 2020). From the beginning of the story, readers witness the fragmented experiences the protagonist navigates across both war and civil life. For instance, the unsettling childhood memory of seeing his neighbor, Jackie Maguire, cry over the mysterious disappearance of his wife becomes a localized baseline for understanding grief. This domestic memory later becomes entangled with the shocking revelation that the narrator's own brother was having an affair with Maguire's wife. This early exposure to localized moral compromise and hidden suffering acts as a psychological precursor, complicating his descent into witnessing the macro-trauma of the Burma Railway. These fragmented passages about the witnessing of memory may appear disjointed, yet they reveal the sensory power of trauma and invite reader interpretation. This folds the hidden lines of descent into historical events on the Burma Railway, enabling a post-memorial conception of a genealogy of trauma where the experience of loss is never complete and remains infinitely open to reinterpretation.

3 Non-Linear Narration as a Traumatic Sign

Literature has long been marked by fragmented narration, often used to reflect psychological disintegration. Though it is not a new phenomenon in the literary milieu, it gained prominence in the early modern century. Writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce experimented with disjointed narration to convey the deep emotional turmoil and ambivalence of their characters. Their works demonstrate how narrative fragmentation can serve as a powerful tool to express deep psychological trauma and existential uncertainty. In addition, the disruption of narration is taken as an important sign of trauma, particularly in postmodern fiction. Many postmodern authors use narration to diversify the postmodern condition, highlighting the unclear line between fact and fiction, complicating the generalized effects of war, and exposing the distorted, deconstructed image of wartime truth. Readers often encounter problems in comprehending the reliability of the authorial voice, which subsequently affects their perception of the story's craft. The rupture at the base of the narration often results in disjointed ends of the plot, unstable character development, and a destabilized sense of time and memory. As David Harding notes, "the role of institutions in narrative construction provides a link between institutions and identities, as institutions shape narratives and narratives constitute identities" (Harding et al., 2017). Similarly, this narrational disruption embeds heavily into Flanagan's story to uncover a postmodern approach. The narrative oscillates between past and present, the vigor of youth and the fragility of old age:

He just stared into flames. A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else. In his old age Dorrigo Evans never knew if he had read this or had himself made it up. Made up, mixed up, and broken down
(Flanagan, 2013, 4)

This brief passage clarifies how the story stakes its structure on a fragmented and unstable narration. His constant jump in analyzing his relationships with Amy and Colonel Nakamura is a sheer sign of passion and pain—one representing a gleeful memory and the other representing a gloomy, dark passage. Many passages detail his admiration for Amy, devoting descriptions to how her sensual beauty brought charm to his heart even at the core of his bleakest periods in the POW camp. On the other hand, even after becoming a famous and celebrated surgeon, his memory of Nakamura brings a sense of trigger and hallucination:

And what I felt, Major Nakamura, the colonel continued, was something so large in my stomach it was as if I were now another man. I had gained something, that's what I felt. It was a great and terrible feeling. As if I had died too and was now reborn
(Flanagan, 2013, 123)

This split further intensifies the temporal disintegration of thoughts and memory. This non-linear narrative structure echoes Cathy Caruth's notion that traumatic memory is inherently "unsettled, fragmented, and repeatedly revisited" (Caruth, 1996). In the later part of his life, Dorrigo finds great difficulty in remembering many events associated with his past prisoner life. He himself is unsure of what is true and what is untrue. Struggles to reconstruct past memories eventually make him appear to be an unreliable narrator:

he didn't remember that Wat Conney had died during the march north to Three Pagoda Pass, nor any of the march's attendant cruelties. For him, such things were not the truth of it. His sons corrected his memories more and more. What the hell did they know? Apparently, a lot more than him. Historians, journalists, documentary makers, even his own bloody family pointing out errors, inconsistencies, lapse and straight-out contradictions in his varying accounts. Who was he meant to be?

(Flanagan, 2013, 432)

This correlates closely with the idea that narratives existing in conscious thought and memory can function as post-hoc justifications for behavior, making them highly unstable (Harding et al., 2017).

4 Poetry: The Bridge of Beauty and Horror

Poetry in prison narratives has occupied a dominant position throughout history. Many prisoners have written poems discussing themes of separation, loss, hope, and purging dreams to reflect their deepest thoughts. They feel that poetry is a safe space to articulate the innermost parts of themselves that confinement tries to silence. They represent poetry as a metaphorical channel through which emotional agony can be released. In prison settings, certain thoughts and expressions are implicitly restricted. Cristina Domenech, who teaches poetry to prisoners, observes:

In prison, you can't dream. In prison, you can't cry. Some words are virtually forbidden, like the word 'time,' the word 'future,' the word 'wish.' Poetry and creative writing provide a safe channel for these suppressed thoughts and emotions—a psychological escape when physical escape is impossible

(Prison Mindfulness Institute, 2025)

Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* extends this idea by embedding haiku as a poetic form woven within a POW narrative, using its concise, image-rich form to transform the horrible accounts of prisoners' lives into an aesthetic experience. Flanagan extensively uses poetry as a dual instrument: a documentary tool to record suffering, and a therapeutic medication that reframes trauma into an expressive language of survival. Throughout the fiction, recollecting Basho's haiku becomes a source of solace for several characters, healing not just the victims' wounds but, paradoxically, those of the victimizers as well. They find a voice in the silence, helping to alleviate tension, stress, and ambivalent thoughts, thereby restoring the hope they had previously lost. For Dorrigo Evans, poetry embodies a "re-authoring" experience that softly lessens intrusive, cruel memories, gesturing toward the possibility of a new beginning. One poignant example resonant with the collective grief of war reads:

*Across the sea, corpses in the water,
Across the mountains, corpses upon the grass
We die by the side of our Emperor
We never look back*

(Flanagan, 2013, 360)

Interestingly, Evans's relationship with poetry is interconnected with his shifting emotions and moods, offering release and reflection. His profound connection to poetry is underscored by the novel's title itself, drawn from Matsuo Basho's classic haiku diary *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*) (Arimitsu, 2017). Flanagan cites lines from accomplished poets such as Basho, Issa, and Tennyson, embodying a shared reverence for the form. This exemplifies how poetry has the ability to transcend linguistic and cultural differences, interweaving as a unifying thread that connects people across diverse regions and ethnicities. Dorrigo reads and rereads Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" on several occasions in the story. He reads it during both his happiest and deadliest times; the former represents his time with Amy, and the latter symbolizes his moments of profound numbness:

*My purpose hold
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars until I die.
And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought*

(Flanagan, 2013, 442)

He mumbles these lines when he has lost almost everything, strongly believing they were written specifically for him. He situates poetry as an art form that has the power to find beauty amidst darkness and seek eternal meaning within chaos. Apart from fostering peace, poetry fosters communal strength among the inmates in an environment marked by life-imposed uncertainties, bleakness, and pervasive hopelessness. Poetry as an art form is embraced not only by the victims but also by the captors. Notably, Major Nakamura recites poetic lines during moments of intense strain as a means of consoling his battered heart:

Of course, Nakamura knew Umi Yukaba, the ancient poems that had become so popular during the war that every radio announcement of a battle... Nakamura recited the last two lines as if they were a password: We die by the side of our Emperor, We never look back
(Flanagan, 2013, 361)

The novel foregrounds the motif of the circle, particularly through Shisui's death poem, which embeds meanings of "void, an endless mystery, lengthless breadth, the great wheel, eternal return: the circle—antithesis of the line" (Flanagan, 2013, 28). Resolving this mystery remains an aspiring passion for the protagonist throughout the work. He continues to try to comprehend the circle during his period in the warfare, yet he faces complete obscurity in reaching a conclusion. While the line embodies obliqueness, uncertainty, and a linear progression toward death, the circle symbolizes continuity, regeneration, and the resilience with which human life can endure suffering. The circle mirrors the cycle of Dorriego's own life. His efforts to comprehend it continue long into his retirement. The pursuit becomes even more serious when he is on his deathbed. When he tastes the obol forced into his mouth, he feels a sudden void around him and immediately senses the "void he was becoming and he remembered the circle and finally understood its meaning" (Flanagan, 2013, 444). This narrative reinforces the notion that while prison life confines the body, recollecting and reciting poems offers liberation to a suffocated mind and spirit: "While the doors to physical cages may remain shut, the doors to imagination, healing, and growth can swing wide open through the simple yet profound act of putting pen to paper" (Prison Mindfulness Institute, 2025).

5 Conclusion

The *Narrow Road to the Deep North* masterfully intertwines the multifaceted phases of war with intense human emotion. At times, the narrative discourse may prompt readers to align with Lynn Wharton's contention that "everything is true but nothing authentic" due to its highly amplified structural layering (Wharton, 1999). However, through Dorriego Evans, Flanagan effectively portrays how memory becomes both a burden and a road to self-reflection. Recollections oscillate between love and loss, guilt and redemption, thereby destabilizing the boundaries between truth and fiction. Trauma emerges not only as an individual affliction but as a collective wound that disrupts temporal continuity and narrative coherence, producing a fragmented structure that mirrors the prisoners' inner disintegration. Ultimately, Flanagan's novel does not merely recount historical atrocities; it reframes them through a deeply human lens where memory, trauma, and art intersect. By blurring the lines between past and present, fact and fiction, the novel testifies to the enduring power of literature to bear witness, preserve the fragmented echoes of suffering, and seek meaning amidst absolute devastation. In doing so, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* becomes a profound meditation on the ultimate resilience of the human spirit.

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