

**Portrayal of Human Rights Violations in Richard Flanagan's
*The Narrow Road to the Deep North***

Mohan Lal J C**Dr. A. Xavier Chandra Bose**

Ph.D Research Scholar

Research Supervisor

Reg.No:18123064011004

Associate Professor and HOD

Department of English and Research Centre

Department of English

Lekshmpuram College of Arts and Science

Lekshmpuram College of Arts and Science

Neyyoor – 629802

Neyyoor – 629802

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar

University, Tirunelveli – 627012,

University, Tirunelveli – 627012,

Tamil Nadu, India.

Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract:

This article examines Richard Flanagan's Booker-Prize winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* as a literary intervention into the historical record of the Burma-Thailand Railway. Reading the text through a new-historicism lens, the study foregrounds Flanagan's depiction of brutality as a systematic violation of fundamental human rights. It contextualises the novel against archival evidence that more than 60,000 Allied prisoners of war and up to 2,50,000 Asian civilian labourers were coerced into building the 415-kilometre railway under inhumane conditions, with 13,000 Australians among the POWs. Close textual analysis shows how Flanagan combines graphic realism, polyphonic narration, and ethical reflection to expose the physical torture, psychological trauma, and moral injuries suffered by the captives. By juxtaposing official Japanese rhetoric of military necessity with the lived experience of POWs, Flanagan dismantles triumphalist war narratives and re-inscribes the victims' agency within the historical memory of World War II. The article argues that the novel functions simultaneously as memorial, witness-literature, and postcolonial critique, compelling twenty-first-century readers to confront the enduring legacies of war crimes and the ethical imperative of remembrance.

Keywords: Richard Flanagan; Burma–Thailand Railway; prisoners of war; trauma studies; new historicism; human rights.

Brutality, widely defined, includes physical assault, psychological abuse, and structural injustice. Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* dramatizes one of the most infamous episodes of wartime brutality: the forced construction of the Burma-Thailand Railway, weaving together the personal testimonies of Australian surgeon Dorrigo Evans, fellow Allied prisoners of war, and their Japanese and Korean captors. The tale, set in the dense woods and blistering heat where over 60,000 Western POWs and up to 250,000 Asian civilian labourers toiled under cruel conditions, emphasises systematic human-rights violations such as malnutrition, torture, and medical neglect. Richard Flanagan powerfully articulates the devastation of war through evocative narrative and vivid testimony:

For an instant he thought he grasped the truth of a terrifying world in which one could not escape horror, in which violence was eternal, the great and only verity, greater than the civilisations it created, greater than any god man worshipped, for it was the only true god. It was as if man existed only to transmit violence to ensure its domain is eternal. (Flanagan 294-295)

In order to understand how Flanagan's polyphonic narration challenges prevailing war narratives and highlights the moral difficulties of memory and testimony, the study employs a new historicist lens, Stephen Greenblatt asserts, "literary works as models of organic unity than as fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses" (Greenblatt 41). which places literary works within their cultural and political contexts. By interpreting texts and historical documents as mutually illuminating artifacts moulded by power, ideology, and human agency, new historicism denies the idea of a single, authoritative history. Flanagan does this by reconstructing the living experiences of prisoners of war and by challenging the post-war processes of silencing and commemoration that followed Japan's military defeat. "A good book, he had concluded, leaves you wanting to reread the book. A great book compels you to reread your own soul" (Flanagan 27).

Placing the Narrow Road in the context of historiography and current human rights

discourse, this article contends that Flanagan's book serves as a memorial, witness book, and postcolonial critique all at once, forcing readers in the twenty-first century to face historical atrocities as timeless models for ongoing conflicts over historical responsibility and the value of human dignity.

The Burma–Thailand Railway, also referred to as the "Death Railway," was designed in the middle of 1942 as a vital overland route between Bangkok and Rangoon to supply Japanese troops fighting in Burma. The building was finished on October 17, 1943, more than a year ahead of schedule, having started on September 16, 1942. "Horror can be contained within a book, given form and meaning. But in life horror has no more form than it does meaning. Horror just is. And while it reigns, it is as if there is nothing in the universe that it is not" (Flanagan 23). Along its roughly 415-kilometer course, the line passed through river valleys, rough hills, and deep jungle, including the infamous Hellfire Pass in the Tenasserim Hills.

There were two main groups of workers assigned to build the Burma–Thailand Railway. About 60,000 Allied prisoners of war (POWs), including American, British, Australian, and Dutch soldiers, made up the first. These people were forced to work on the railway after being moved from Changi and other prison camps. The second, far bigger group consisted of *rōmusha*, or civilian labourers from Southeast Asia. Between 180,000 and 250,000 Burmese, Malayans, Indians, Javanese, Chinese, and Thais were reportedly kidnapped or forced to work on the construction under such appalling conditions.

These labourers were subjected to purposefully cruel and demeaning working conditions from the beginning. Temperatures regularly exceeded 40°C due to the tropical climate, and monsoon rains turned the already crude camps into filthy, muddy slums. There was widespread and severe hunger among those compelled to work as a result of the food rations' extreme inadequacy, which frequently provided fewer than 1,000 calories per day.

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.305

For an instant he thought he grasped the truth of a terrifying world in which one could not escape horror, in which violence was eternal, the great and only verity, greater than the civilizations it created, greater than any god man worshipped, for it was the only true god. It was as if man existed only to transmit violence to ensure its domain is eternal. For the world did not change, this violence had always existed and would never be eradicated, men would die under the boot and fists and horror of other men until the end of time, and all human history was a history of violence. (Flanagan 294-295)

Because medical supplies were so limited, the labour force was exposed to cholera, beriberi, malaria, and dysentery outbreaks that spread unchecked across the camps.

The tremendous human cost highlights the scope of the railway's cruelty. About 12,621 of the 60,000 or so Allied prisoners of war who were made to labour on the line died from exhaustion, malnutrition, illness, and the frequent physical mistreatment by guards. Even more devastating were the civilian casualties: at least 250,000 Rōmusha were involved, and over 90,000 of them perished, mostly from malnourishment and illness. There were also considerable losses among the Japanese staff that oversaw and maintained the camps of 12,000 soldiers and 800 Korean auxiliary forces, with about 1,000 fatalities primarily from disease. These horrifying numbers highlight the railway's lasting reputation as a representation of institutionalized cruelty and human rights abuses.

Approximately 1,000 workers were living in open-sided bamboo dormitories at construction camps spaced 8–17 km apart along the route. Under threat of beatings or summary execution, soldiers were forced to break boulders by hand and clear rainforest with crude tools during the most intense time, known as the Speedo, which lasted from mid-spring until mid-October 1943.

The route connected Ban Pong in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma by October 1943, when both civilian and military labour pools were depleted. This allowed for the overland shipment of 500,000 tonnes of military supplies before it was abandoned in 1945. The extent of the misery

caused by the railway leaves an enduring impression on its legacy, making it a powerful representation of systemic human rights abuses during the conflict.

Flanagan's story in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* consistently highlights particular Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) articles by demonstrating how they are violated via the experiences of forced labourers and prisoners. "Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person" (United Nations), according to Article 3 of the UDHR. This entitlement is obviously denied in the book, as evidenced by the constant depletion of food rations and the imposition of lethal work quotas at locations such as Hellfire Pass, which show a systematic disdain for human life and security.

Additionally, the book draws attention to abuses of Article 5, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (United Nations). Flanagan's detailed portrayals of abuse, like the capricious and brutal killing of the character Darky Gardiner, demonstrate how torture became commonplace in the camp setting and demonstrate how horrific acts were frequently carried out without any military justification.

Article 25 of the UDHR states,

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (United Nations)

The systematic deprivation experienced by both prisoners and civilian labourers is highlighted throughout the book by frequent allusions to illnesses like beriberi, malaria, and dysentery as well as the wilful denial of medical treatment and adequate sustenance.

Finally, according to Article 1 of the UDHR, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations). By using a polyphonic narrative framework that gives agency and dignity back to a variety of silenced voices—from Allied officers to Asian labourers and even Korean guards—Flanagan reaffirms this idea. By doing this, he questions the prevalent, homogenous narratives of the conflict and emphasizes how human dignity transcends nationality and military rank.

By using these storytelling techniques, Flanagan's book not only chronicles past suffering but also analyses it from the perspective of modern human rights. This reinforces the work's function as a monument and an ethical statement, highlighting the moral necessity of remembering and recognizing historical tragedies within a timeless, global framework of human rights.

In order to portray the intricacy, cruelty, and moral ambiguity of life during and after the construction of the Burma–Thailand Railway, Richard Flanagan uses a variety of complicated narrative approaches in his novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The novel opens with these lines “A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else” (Flanagan 3).

Flanagan's book is notable for its polyphonic narrative, which presents the viewpoints of several individuals before, during, and after the war, including Japanese commanders, Australian prisoners of war, Korean guards, and civilians. This multi-voiced technique reveals the changing moral boundaries between culprit, victim, and onlooker, escaping the confines of a single heroic tale. Instead of following a chronological timeline, the story alternates between pre-war innocence, the horrific realities of the POW camp, and the lasting effects these events had on survivors' life after the war. The main event—Darky Gardiner's fatal beating—is reenacted from multiple perspectives, enhancing its emotional impact and highlighting the repercussions of cruelty and memory.

By using a third-person omniscient narration, Flanagan takes the reader into the heads of Japanese officers like Nakamura and at least five Australian characters. This tactic humanizes even the adversaries in the book by exposing their insecurities, addictions, justifications, and attempts at self-redemption. The complex characterization avoids oversimplified depictions of good and evil in favour of emphasizing how situational, societal, and ideological pressures influence people.

By alternating scenes of psychological and physical horror with instances of interpersonal and cultural connection, Flanagan heightens the emotional contrast of his story. In order to maintain their dignity, Australian soldiers cling to memories and customs of "mateship," whereas Japanese leaders converse about haiku poetry during violent acts. By referencing Bashō's travel journal, the novel's title overlays historical events with Japanese cultural heritage, reminding the reader of the persistent, albeit brittle, capacity for beauty in the midst of horror.

The story is purposefully broken apart to illustrate how trauma messes with identity and linear memory. Both Japanese officers and prisoners of war are shown as survivors struggling with sadness, shame, and the impossibility of leading a regular life after the war. The complexities of remembering, the enduring effects of trauma, and the alluring notion of redeemed heroism are all emphasized by the structure. The psychological consequences of surviving are highlighted by Nakamura's attempt to avoid war crimes prosecution while seeking personal absolution and Dorrigo Evans' battle with post-war celebrity and self-loathing.

Every chapter of the book begins with a haiku, which is a formal homage to Japanese literature that both contrasts and repeats the book's ideas. Poetry and literature are interwoven throughout the text, highlighting the novel's dual function as a remembrance and a testimony, connecting personal experiences to more general issues of historical narrative and moral obligation.

Flanagan is able to reveal the connections between cruelty and compassion, memory and quiet, and history and fiction by combining various narrative techniques. As a result, the book not

only chronicles suffering but also asks readers to consider how they have responded to atrocity, culpability, and the quest for purpose following acts of collective violence.

Richard Flanagan *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is a potent literary work that transforms our perceptions of memory, human rights, and conflict. The novel challenges traditional heroic war narratives and restores dignity to those frequently silenced in official histories through its polyphonic structure, complex character development, and purposeful engagement with both history and ethics. In addition to documenting the cruelty and suffering that Asian labourers and Allied prisoners of war faced during the building of the Burma–Thailand Railway, Flanagan portrays these events as grave violations of fundamental human rights.

The novel links historical crimes to current ethical discussions throughout the world by referencing the language and tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights within the framework of World War II. This method turns the story from a chronicle of pain into an appeal for moral responsibility, remembering, and constant watchfulness to prevent similar injustices from happening again.

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* serves as a counter-history by fusing postcolonial critique, memorialization, and testimonial authority. It forces readers to consider the long-lasting psychological and social effects of systematic cruelty, urging compassion, introspection, and a steadfast adherence to the value of human dignity. As a result, Flanagan's book enhances literary studies as well as more general discussions about rapprochement, collective memory, and the need to protect human rights in the face of past and present violence.

Works Cited

Flanagan, Richard. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Vintage, 2015.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "Introduction." *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, 1982. United

Nations. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations,

