



A Critical Study of Zizekian Violence in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to The Deep North*

Nihal Bharti (Research Scholar)

Co-author: Dr. Sanjay Kumar Sinha (Professor)

Patna College, Patna

Institution: Patna University

Abstract:- This paper aims to critically examine the representation of violence in Richard Flanagan's work "The Narrow Road to the Deep North" with the Zizekian perspective of violence. The story is set during World War II and it follows the experiences of Dorrigo Evans, a doctor who becomes a prisoner of war and is forced to work on the Thai-Burma Death Railway. Through intricate storytelling, the author navigates the complexities of violence, highlighting its multifaceted nature and enduring consequences. The novel not only showcases the brutality of war but also explores its emotional and psychological toll on both individuals and societies. By depicting violence in such a way, Flanagan exposes how it can strip away compassion, ethics and even our very humanity. His portrayal aligns with Slavoj Zizek's belief that violence often acts as a rupture that reveals underlying issues. Through the realities of war and the traumatic experiences endured by the characters, we witness how societal norms and ideologies are contradicted. This echoes Zizek's argument that violence has the power to disrupt stability within structures, revealing the repressed conflicts and injustices that are otherwise remain concealed. In this paper, the researchers explore the concept of violence as described by Slavoj Zizek, drawing on evidence from Flanagan's book titled "The Narrow Road to the Deep North."

Keywords: violence, war, conflicts, injustice, brutality etc.

Slavoj Zizek is a Slovenian philosopher, cultural critic, and psychoanalyst known for his provocative and innovative theories on ideology, politics, and culture. Born in 1949, Zizek has gained international recognition for his prolific writings and dynamic speaking engagements that challenge conventional wisdom and explore the intricate intersections of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and popular culture. One of Zizek's notable works is "Violence: Six Sideways Reflections," published in 2008. In this book, Zizek examines the phenomenon of violence from a multidisciplinary perspective, blending insights from philosophy, politics, psychology, and critical theory. He investigates the various ways violence operates within societies, not solely as physical force, but also as a symbolic and structural element that shapes human interactions and power dynamics. Before embarking on this research article, understanding the difference between Subjective violence and Objective violence would be helpful. According to Slavoj Zizek, Subjective violence viewed in the public domain as the departure from the normal "peaceful" state of things. In this, violence is inflicted by a clearly identifiable agent of action, as in the case of criminal activity or terrorism whereas objective violence is something that is inherent

in the system, and it is not just physical violence rather it includes various forms of domination and exploitation including the threat of violence. In this, there is no clear perpetrator and is often overlooked in the background of subjective violence outbreaks. For example, objective violence of global poverty cannot be blamed on any single entity and, even if financial elites were to be identified as the one responsible for this, they could still be acquitted due to the functioning of capitalism that makes the rise of an elite financial class inevitable. According to Slavoj Žižek, objective violence is not clearly visible because the way that we are fed stories of violence through the media, prevents us from really thinking about the underlying causes for the subjective violence.

Coming to the select novel here authored by Richard Flanagan, it's a 2014 Booker Prize-winning novel and is majorly set in the period of second world war (1942-45). The central part of the novel focuses on the brutalities inflicted on hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war who are constructing the Thai-Burma Death Railway for the Japanese army. Dorrigo Evans- the central character of the novel works as a surgeon and is also the leader of the Australian prisoners after the fall of Singapore on the hands of Japanese army. In the novel, subjective violence is evident in the brutal treatment of prisoners of war, the physical harm inflicted on characters like Dorrigo Evans, and the atrocities committed during warfare. During the construction of the Burma railway, the prisoners were forced to work no matter how close to starvation they are and no matter how sick they are. Even after that, the slaves were beaten for hours. They have very few tools for the job and wear nothing but filthy rags and suffer from cholera and many other diseases. The prisoners have to walk several miles everyday without food and in the process, some even end up dying. At one instance, Dorrigo Evans even says- "It is true that war is cruel but what war is not? War what we are. War what we do" (Flanagan 83). Throughout, Dorrigo Evans is relatively privileged as a senior officer. He carries out medical procedures without anesthesia or any surgical equipments and at every opportunity he tries to reason with the Japanese for the well-being of his men but Japanese live by entirely different rules and for them, the prisoners were not even humans having no honour. In one instance, Nakamura- the leader of Japanese army there says, "If the prisoners had spirit, they would have chosen death rather than the shame of being a prisoner" (Flanagan 122). These acts are explicit and traumatic, leaving lasting scars on both the victims and the perpetrators. Dorrigo's firsthand experiences in the prison camps, the beatings, forced labor, and killings, exemplify this form of violence whereas objective violence can be observed in the larger context of war, the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy, and the ideologies that justify and perpetuate violence. The Thai-Burma Death Railway itself is a prime example of objective violence, as it emerges from systemic factors such as militarism, nationalism, and the drive for power and control. The objective violence inherent in war machinery and the oppressive prison camp system creates a context where subjective violence becomes the norm. Characters like Dorrigo are subjected to extreme objective violence, which then translates into their experiences of subjective violence as they are beaten, starved, and subjected to harsh labor. This distinction demonstrates how the suffering of individual characters is rooted in larger, impersonal forces that perpetuate violence.

"Suffering is suffering. Suffering is not virtue, nor does it make virtue, nor does of it virtue necessarily flow" (Flanagan 204). The suffering of POWs is shown in great detail as they struggle to build the railroad. Flanagan also describes the experiences of the Japanese officers as they are torned with notions of duty and honour, even as they inflict torture and misery on the prisoners in service to the Empire. Major Nakamura often plays cards with Dorrigo, and the author uses their conversations about their respective roles in the war to show how differently the conflict was viewed through eastern and western perspectives. It will be very apt to choose one particular incident from the novel which shows how both prisoners and their commanders are suffering in some way or the other. One fine morning as the prisoners' commanding officer and senior medical officer, Dorrigo Evans reports to Major Nakamura that four men had died the day before, two overnight, and this leaves eight hundred and thirty-eight POWs. Of this eight hundred and thirty-eight, sixty-seven have cholera and are in cholera compound, and another one hundred and seventy-nine are in hospital with severe illness. A further one hundred

and sixty-seven are too ill for any work other than light duties. Finally, he points at one place and says that there are in addition sixty-two reporting in sick this morning over there. That leaves three hundred and sixty-three men for work on the railway, Dorrigo Evans concluded.

Major Nakamura with an angry tone says but he needs five hundred prisoners.

Dorrigo Evans- "We don't have five hundred fit men and besides, the cholera is destroying us" (Flanagan 215).

But Major Nakamura as not in the mood to listen anything as he had to build the railway line on time so observing his mood, Evans gives him a new number of three-hundred and eighty prisoners, hoping that they could now settle.

Four-hundred and ninety-five, replies Nakamura. Surely there was to be no easy settling.

They kept on arguing, and after ten or more minute of further argument, Dorrigo Evans decided that if there had to be a selection of the sick to work, it should be based on his medical knowledge and on Nakamura's insane demands so he gave him a new number of Four hundred and said, "we are achieving nothing for the Emperor. Men will die who would be of much use once they are better. Four hundred is the best we can muster" and they both settled on this number but just for that day as according to Nakamura, "Health follows will! In Japanese army those who fail to reach objective by lack of health considered most shameful. Devotion until death good" (Flanagan 217).

When Oppressor becomes the Oppressed

The second part of the novel talks about after-war years and it also talks about the impact of war on the life of people who were controlling the prisoners like Nakamura, Goanna etc. Goanna, who was the guard at the prisoners' camp was captured by Allied Powers and put in jail after the war and as a matter of fact, he was not even Japanese, he was a Korean and his real name was Choi Sang-min. He was given a dirt-brown uniform marked with the English letters "CD". The letters, he was told, signified that he was convicted to die. Every few weeks, A Captain would arrive with a notice of execution. The prisoners would wait silently, frozen with fear, wondering who was to die, every man intensely relieved when it was not himself but the man next to him. On one such visit, Choi-Sang min was told that he was to be executed the following morning. Finally, he was provided his last meal. Choi-Sang min looked down at his rice, miso soup and tempura. He longed for his mother's spicy kimchi and hated the bland Japanese food. But hate and anger were no good to him now. He could not eat his last meal. A last meal was an agreement with the inevitability of his death. And he did not agree with his death. He also remembered a Japanese officer who had shown remarkable poise the night before he was executed. When the guards came to weigh him, he told them in broken English that he was dying for Japan, that he was not ashamed of having made the POWs work hard for the Emperor, and that as a military man, he understood that he was to die simply because his country had been defeated. Choi-Sang min longed for such clarity and certainty. The Japanese were at least fighting for their country but what was he doing? He was a Korean who was simply working for the Japanese at the salary of fifty yen a month! He had not done anything for his country and his country had done nothing for him. He had no particular beliefs. He thought of his parents, imagined their anguish on hearing his death, and he realised that he could offer them not one good reason as to why he died, other than fifty yen a month. He also remembered that his last salary of fifty yen was still not given by the Japanese and this angered him even more.

"He was unable to sleep. He felt almost painfully alive and awake and now wanted to taste and know every second of his life. To stop his mind wildly pitching between panic at not being able to escape and anger at not getting his fifty yen he tried to remember how some of the others met their executions." Suddenly someone cried, 'Hurrah for the Great Korean country!' He started wondering what great Korean country? What about his fifty yen? I am not Korean, he thought to himself. "I am not Japanese, I am man of a colony. Where's my fifty yen? Where?" (Flanagan 340). Now he also started thinking about his father who wanted him to have an education but his family's financial condition was not good so he had to leave the elementary school after just three years and started working as a servant for a Korean family. At that time, he was just eight years old. At twelve, he went to work for a Japanese family in six yen a month. At the age of fifteen he heard the Japanese were hiring guards to work in prisoner-of-camps and the pay was fifty yen a month. His thirteen-year-old sister had signed up with the Japanese to go to Manchukuo to work as a "comfort woman" for similar pay. She told him that she would be helping soldiers in hospitals and, like him, was very excited. As she could neither read or write, he had never heard from her again, and now that he knew what comfort women did, he tried not to think about her, and when he did, he hoped for her sake that she was dead. "Sitting on death row, Choi-sang min desperately wanted to have an idea of his own. He hoped that long night that an idea would finally come to him, open him up, an idea that that would allow him to understand and at the same time to know peace. He hoped to be like the Japanese officer who believed in the Emperor, or the Korean guard who believed in Korea. Perhaps he could have asked for more than fifty yen. But no idea came, and far too quickly morning did" (Flanagan 341).

Finally, the prison guards came to take him to the gallows. He tried to fight with them but it was all in vain. They took him exactly at that place where he was to be hanged. His last moments were so tragic that it would be more appropriate to describe that in Flanagan's own words: "He was asked if he wished to say anything. He looked up. A bell somewhere tolled some hour. He wanted to say he had an idea. Someone laughed quickly. He looked down the soldiers and pressmen. He had no idea. He had been paid fifty yen, and fifty yen was not even a good deal, far less an idea. Fifty yen was nothing. On the trapdoor in front of him he saw chalk lines marking what he knew were the correct places for his feet. Fifty yen! he wanted to say. The soldiers continued to hold his arms. He could see the chalk dust as if they were white boulders. He bowed his head and a hood was dropped over it. He closed his eyes, then opened them. After months that had passed by interminably slowly, everything was now happening too fast. He could feel the canvas, and his blackness seemed somehow more frightening than the night of his own eyes, so he closed them again. The morning was already hot. It was stuffy in the hood. He felt the noose drooping over his head, and at the same time he realised his ankles were being bound together. He went to ask them to slow down, to wait, but with a hard, decisive shove he felt the noose tighten around his neck and the only sound he made was an involuntary gasp. He was finding it hard to breathe. His face was jumping wildly. He could not even spit on them, as he hoped Kim Lee had done when they killed him. The soldiers holding either arm frog marched him two steps forward, and he knew he was now standing on the chalk lines on the trapdoor. His last thought was that he needed to scratch his nose as he felt the floor beneath him suddenly vanish and heard the crashing noise of the trapdoor slamming down. Stop! he went to yell. What about my fifty-" (Flanagan 343-344).

To conclude, the application of Zizekian concepts of subjective and objective violence to "The Narrow Road to the Deep North" enriches our understanding of the novel's exploration of violence on multiple levels. By analyzing the interplay between personal experiences, larger systemic forces, language, trauma, cultural symbols, and ideology, we gain deeper insights into how violence shapes characters' lives and how it is intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative. The novel's portrayal of violence becomes a microcosm of Zizek's broader theories about the complexities and contradictions of violence within human society.

References:

“Slavoj Zizek and Violence.” Not Even Past, 14 Oct. 2015, <https://notevenpast.org/slavoi-zizek-and-violence/>. Accessed on 22 July. 2023.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Picador.2008

Flanagan, Richard. *The Narrow Road to The Deep North*. Knopf, Australia.2013, pp. 83, 122, 204, 215, 217, 339-344.

