

# Historiographic Metafiction in Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North*

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## Abstract

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North* is based on true history. It takes us to the historical event "Siam-Burma railway line". The events narrated in the novel runs parallel to the history recorded during 1943-1945. The narration is more realistic. It is viewed with the idea of Linda Hutchenson's "Historiographic metafiction" which deals with the history and the fiction based on history. During the Second World War, the prisoners under the Japanese army are taken Prisoners of War camp and are made to work for the construction of the railway line. This exact tag line is used in the novel. The plight of the prisoners in the camp is sketched. The horror involved in the construction is portrayed.

**Keywords:** historiographic, metafiction, horror, construction

## Introduction

Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road To The Deep North*, the title signifies the railway line that is laid from Burma to Thailand. The title is taken from Japanese haiku master Mutsuo Basho as "Okuno Hosomichi" published in the year 1694 which is a poetic travelogue which is about Basho travel to the northern part of Japan. Even the title has something to do with the details of Japan. The plot of this novel is based on the historical event "Burma death railway". The event has paved the way for the death of many prisoners who are taken as camp prisoners to build this railway line. Richard Flanagan conveys, the readers, the impact of the event by narrating it with the fictitious characters. They can be related to the event in such a way even as real-life characters. This work is more original because Flanagan's has his father who has witnessed the reality of the event and had been one of the war prisoners of the camp and survived in it.

This novel talks about the Japanese prisoner of war (POW) camp and the process involved in Siam- Burmese railway line. In the POW camp, the prisoner's struggles from starvation and diseases like cholera. They are not even treated as human beings and many are beaten to death. Dorrigo Evans, who is a surgeon, is taken as POW in the process of the railway work. Dorrigo Evan's is affected personally because when he is taken as a POW he loses his

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chance to marry Amy whom he and he longs for her almost all of his life. It makes as to feels as though the characters and their names care fictitious in away whereas the narration and the historic event makes it is so realistic that it feels as if we are in the frame watching the happenings and the sufferings. Flanagan does not portray the lighter part but spots the horror that is involved. The Burma Railway cannot be viewed as a technological improvement that the Japanese planned. The Japanese aimed to connect Burma as it could be one of the best ways to connect with the southern parts especially China. They also aimed at reaching the northern parts of India.

## Discussion

The Railway line is originally termed as “Thailand-Burma Railway”. Now is being called as “Death Railway” as it has killed one hundred thousand laborers in the sixteen-month construction work that took place between 1942 and 1943. The railway line stretches 250 miles from Bang Pong, Thailand to Thanbuyuzayat, Burma. Even after the construction of the railway line, the prisoners at the POW camps died until 1945.” Most of the people died due to infectious diseases like cholera, dysentery and Malnutrition. The slave laborers who were taken as prisoners, among them contained Burmese, Malay, Tamil, Americans, Australians, British, Dutch and Indians. Only later the POWs were saved from the Japanese Army when the Allied forces rescued them from the camp. Through characters such as Dorrigo Evans, Nakamura, Darky Gardiner, etc the author sketches the historical event through the lives of these people.

The combination of history and narrating it with the fictional characters introduces the readers to interpret the novel in the view as “Historiographic metafiction”. The term “Historiographic Metafiction” is termed by Linda Hutchenson. People say that this kind of novel is another version of the historic novel. Linda says that this kind of fiction makes us think in a self-reflexive way. In her article *Historiographic metafiction –Parody and the Intertextuality of History* she further adds that “Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction” Here, in this novel, it shows it is the people and their emotions and feelings. The writings of Flanagan beautifully trace that the war and the impact that is created in a person even after the war.

The immense suffering of hundreds of thousands of human beings at that very moment for that senseless line of embankments and cuttings and corpses, of gouged earth and massed dirt and blasted rock and more corpses, of bamboo wrestling and teetering bridges and teak sleepers and even more corpses of innumerable dog spikes and inexorable iron lines, of corpse after corpse after corpse after corpse- for that railway to exist, he understood that Darky Gardiner must be punished. (*The Narrow* 292)

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These lines clearly show how cruel people are treated. Life of people is not even considered. They are just viewed as machines. Whole of their power is extracted and treated as lifeless bodies when they cannot help them in the process of the construction.

People who lived there cannot do anything about the situation or that has happened to their fellow mates. “They had smoked to keep the dead from preying on their minds they had eaten to remind themselves they were alive” (32). These lines show how people are used to the death of the people. It has become so common that they did not even shed tears as the happenings are usual. They just smoke before the bodies and they just feel about themselves and their life. “There are no names of the hundreds of thousands who died building that railway. But there is not even an agreed numbering of all those died building that railway. By then these is not even as an agreed numbering” (*The Narrow* 25)

The authors make the readers understand that the number of dead members recorded in history may be lesser than the estimated number of dead prisoner. Here the historical record is questioned from the fiction which makes it more connective. “As naked slaves, they were starved and beaten and worked beyond exhaustion on the Line. And as naked slaves they began to die for line” (*The Narrow* 49). So all that mattered was the railway line. To Japanese, the result of the construction and the deadline to complete the construction with the limited number of prisoners is considered much than the life of the prisoners or their conditions. “No one could reckon it, neither the weak nor the strong. The dead begun to accumulate- Three last week, eight this week, God knows how many today” (*The Narrow* 49). Day by day the death of the people started increasing. Flanagan writes it in a way that his narrating becomes realistic and more obvious when it is cross-checked with the history recorded. Maybe the characters stand fictitious but even the characters become realistic.

At the camp, there was not even the supply of meagre amount of food for the prisoners. “Starvation stalked the Australians. It hid in each man’s every act and every thought... And still the dead kept on accumulating” (*The Narrow* 50). All that the Japanese army concerned was the railway line that has to be completed as per the order. “They were captives of the Japanese” (*The Narrow* 52). Even if they are sick, they are not treated properly to save their lives. When they become sick because of starvation or because of the disease the Japanese army wants to get rid of them. According to the Japanese, to spend money or to take of them in the camp is just a mere act. Flanagan reveals the depletion of humanity that made the Japanese to act ruthlessly.

### Summation

Thus, the history and the fiction that is taken into account run parallel to each other with the idea of Linda Hutchenson’s “Historical Metafiction”. Historiographic metafiction reveals the

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truth and points at the lies of the historical record. Flanagan tries to convey the reality and at times he questions the happenings.

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