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Shattered Identities: Captivity, Memory, And Existential Crisis In The Select War Memoirs

K. Sujitha[1], Dr. R. Ajith[2]

[1]Doctoral Scholar, Reg. No:19213214012003, Research Centre for English, V.O. Chidambaram College, Tuticorin, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)
[2]Assistant Professor of English, Research Centre for English, V.O Chidambaram College, Tuticorin, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)

In the time of World War II, Japanese captures the Allied soldiers and made them slaves to build a railway line across Thailand and Burma. These prisoners of war suffered a lot that they lost their identities even after freedom. They were beaten, made to endure all sorts of torments. They were just skeletons when they were found after liberation. This article considers the theme of shattered selves in memoirs of prisoners of war (POW) of the Japanese during World War II. Examining, The Railway Man by Eric Lomax, The Forgotten Highlander by Alistair Urquhart, One Fourteenth of an Elephant by Ian Denys Peek, Last Man Out by Richard Charles, and Richard Flanagan's fictionalized memoir The Narrow Road to the Deep North, the research uses structures from trauma theory, and personal memoirs to show how enslavement entirely upsets personal and emotional identity. These memoirs reveal how endurance, segregation of memory, and absence of communication with the family, shatter the self, even decades after release. Writing becomes an agent not for conclusion but for encountering the unresolved nature of trauma. The researcher uses above POW memoirs as determining texts to understand the long-term psychological impact of war.

Key Words: Prisoner of war, Memoirs, trauma, shattered self, enslavement, silence.

Burma Railway, built during the Second World War connects Thailand and Burma. It was built along the Kwai River. It is built to support the Japanese soldiers in Burma Campaign. Many Allied Prisoners of war and Asians were died in the course of its construction. They died mainly due to sickness, malnutrition and were buried then and there. There were no records of them and the Japanese never worried having them recorded. The place where the railway was constructed was mostly mountainous and filled with dense jungle. This region has one of the worst climates. Regardless of all the Japanese tried to complete the railway in just fourteen months using the prisoners of war. Not only them, the South Indians especially Tamils who were brought as coolies to work on the estates were also affected by the Japanese. They were also perished in large numbers.

During the Second World War the construction of the Siam-Burma Railway was marked one of the most psychologically ruthless in chapters of war history, exceptionally for Allied prisoners of war (POWs). While the documents only records physical suffering, it is the memoirs unveil the existential crisis while and after confinement. In the select memoirs, the survivor has to withstand hunger, involuntary labor and concealment. The five select memoirs though reveal angles of shattered selves it comprise of psychological and deterioration of identity. Though all five select texts speak of death railway and the prisoners of war, they voice out idiosyncratically.

Every soldier has a definite identification before war but after war all their identification ends up with perplexity. Lomax exhibits, "Finally we were told that our names were abolished and that we were to have new identities. Mine was rokyakuju-go, which sounded splendid but translated merely as No. 615. The former Prisoner No. 1 was slipping fast. They made us memorize and repeat our numbers over and over again until we got them right," (The Railway Man 179). Ian Denys Peek in One Fourteenth of an Elephant, speaks of existential crisis, "It has become quite apparent to all of us that we have been, by force of circumstances, reduced to living like animals in many ways; but only in our physical lives, for we remain in spirit determinedly human beings holding tightly to personal pride and dignity." (53). Robert Charles in Last Man Out, while speaking about dehumanization he says,

> We were first made to bow and salute our new "masters" all Japanese, regardless of rank. To them, bowing had been a custom for centuries, a way of expressing honor and respect. The deeper and more prolonged the bow, the greater the respect. Had we known this, no doubt we would have taken it in stride, rather than regard it as a humiliating thing to have to do. It was the method they had of enforcing such a custom that made it even more degrading. With few exceptions, no one in the military had ever been slapped in the face, beaten, or made to act like a slave for a simple infraction of discipline. But brutality now became a way of life. (42)

The camp has become a strange place where a normal rule doesn't work out. The hierarchy of military or rank goes meaningless, so the prisoners have to suppress their emotions in order to stay alive.

Cathy Caruth in her Unclaimed Experience defines trauma as "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature" (4). This unsettled experience brings about different versions in a soldier. One part of them may be a person who endured all the sufferings and came back safely but another part of them wants to explicate what he has endured to the world. Flanagan's fictionalized hero Dorrigo Evans thinks, "Whatever they called him—hero, coward, fraud—all of it now seemed to have less and less to do with him." (16). In the light of war and captivity, trauma doesn't just messes with the identity, it ruins the coherence. The fragments that remain not in any circumstances meet the harmonious entity.

During imprisonment the soldiers were expected to have emotional toughness, moral integrity and endurance but all these wartime traits were impossible to maintain as the prisoners

of war were forced to endure hunger, disease, torture and humiliation, which lead them to do shameful things like betraying their comrades. Peek writes,

> I'm beginning to tremble; I can't reconcile my conscience with this shocking extravagance. Eighteen months of starvation, every cent to be hoarded and spent with exacting self-control, and here I am tossing whole dollars away for one roll of toilet paper and two tins of strawberry jam! I could burst into tears, I really could, at my weakness. (335)

The prisoners were judged by values they no longer have. Lomax mentions, "Here was Eric Lomax playing the part of the newly-wed, pretending he was what he had been in 1941, before he left for the East, when his innocence and much of his emotional life had not been ripped out of him." (240). The Veterans tend to feign that they are ok masking their pain, fear and traumatic experience which only deepen the scar and prevents the recovery.

Across the five memoirs letters symbols the shattered link between the POWs and their loved ones. These letters are often missing or never arrived. Even if they are received they are censored and limited. Peek recalls one of the letters received by a prisoner of war, "'Dear Son, I am only allowed to write 25 words, and have used them all up, so no news for now. Your loving father.'" (449). Alistair Urquhart laments: "The lack of contact from our families also got us down. Men wondered how their families were surviving the bombing of British cities, if sons and brothers had been conscripted. The lack of letters from home made us feel like a forgotten army and we were anxious that our families knew we were OK" (111). These Letters shows that emotional reunion between the prisoners of war and their families is impossible because it lacks emotional reality. Thus the war and captivity shatter the relationship as well as identity.

Veterans like Lomax and others started using memoir to reconstruct their shattered self. Even though it is therapeutic to write it does not leads to complete healing. Gilmore says,

> autobiographical stories of trauma and violence not to read (as many recently have) the current popularity of memoir through the lens of identity politics or talk-show-style confession, but-more provocatively-to explore the strategies writers employ when the constraints of both narrative form and jurisprudence would serve to hinder rather than elicit the telling of a traumatic past. (Mintz)

Lomax opens up in the form of memoir in order to bring out his inner suffering, his emotions and his memories that come back as nightmares. He uses writing as a tool to explicate what has happened to the people like him who were captured and tortured by the Japanese. Lomax quotes from "I am alive, and was dead. . . . Write therefore the things which thou hast seen" (Lomax) shows that after many years Lomax is living again through his memoir. His memoir is a form of testimony which bears witness to the tortures endured by the Prisoners of war. In Bible, revelation brings out what it is like after returning back from dead; likewise Lomax brings out the pains and sufferings of the veterans after coming back from imminent death.

Alistair Urquhart in The Forgotten Highlander clarifies, "My story may be remarkable but for over sixty years I have remained silent about my sufferings at the hands of the Japanese." (1). The Memoir is not every time coherent as it is up to the memory of the witness. Writing is just a tool used for revealing repressed happenings. Corresponding to Alistair, Robert Charles in Last Man Out states that, "And I knew it was also possible now for the first time to start writing the book." (193), they write not for clarity but to bring s new beginning.

All these five authors have different nationality and class, though they are united by the experience of POW. Through moral and historical ideas Lomax interprets his suffering under the enslavement of Japanese. He knows he is responsible for those who died in the line and need to seek justice for them, and reconciliation with his torturer denotes his need for personal healing. Peek was a teenager when he was captured. He spoke for the loss of innocence and shows his anger at the government for not seeking justice for them.

Alistair Urquhart, a Scottish soldier, mixes up military pride and personal horror when he says, "I had to wear my uniform in public…We knew we were being sent somewhere but we never had any inkling as to where it might be.The short stay at home gave me time to reflect on the past six weeks and on what lay ahead." (29). It reflects his coexistence with honor and horror.

Robert Charles, a marine, reflects on extreme suffering and brutality endured by his comrades. In the text, while others speak of Australians bravery he is worried about, "The prisoners later talked about the bravery of the Aussies. There was no doubt about that. But all I could think about was having witnessed human beings at their sickest, lowest level." (147). Richard Flanagan even though he writes after decades, through his fictional novel he questions the Australian nation. The nation is happy about the end of the war and is celebrating it, but they are not worried about the prisoners of war who were died and the veterans who came back. Flanagan through his fictionalized memoir portrays how the nation is ignoring the dead and how they are not ready to face their messy past.

The POWs represented in the all five memoirs portray how captivity, memory and existential crisis post-war shatter their selves. All the five memoirs does not only speak of end of war or freedom it also conveys how trauma, memory and existential crisis creates fragmentation. The authors here do not convey that they won the war or they have healed thoroughly. They are also not representing them as hero, where they reversed their suffering into strength. They clearly depicts how their self is fragmented and how they still working on it even after decades. The torture they endured completely shattered them without any means for restoration. The memoirists not only speak of physical pain but also of psychological damage they undergo. The reader who read these texts must know that trauma hinder coherence and so the text will be arbitrary. They must identify the pain behind the silence, because not all are communicable. Ultimately they should not justify the memoir with heroic nature.

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