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Complex Trauma: A Mnemonic Device to Re-experience Cultural Genealogy and Reconciliation. A Study through Richard Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and *Narrow Road to the Deep North*

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ABSTRACT

Post Traumatic Growth has been researched in a hugely diverse set of traumatic events from divorce and death to natural disasters or terrorist attacks. The literature on PTG shows that even though the causes of PTG are vast and the benefits reported fall into three categories.

- Feeling stronger and finding hidden abilities and strengths
- Good relationships are strengthened
- Priorities and philosophies concerning the present day are altered

Trauma is no more subjective but it indicates socio – cultural importance. Not all experiences regulate overwhelming emotions and lead to trauma related disorder. Even the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can influence an individual to arouse his cultural and ethnical identity. The three selected novels of Australian writer Richard Flanagan elucidate the capability of human beings to overcome trauma inflicted on them and regulate a sense of meaning from what they have experienced. A sense of belonging is developed both personally and culturally and characters re-experience their cultural genealogy by converting PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) to PTG (Post Traumatic Growth).

Key Words: PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), PTG (Post Traumatic Growth), Cultural Genealogy, Identity, Reconciliation

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The sense of genealogy presents an alternative to usual theories of trauma which focus on individual pathology. It presents a way to the lineage. Traumatic realism allows for a re-examination of how the margins of the historical can be inscribed within the boarder of social and historical trauma. Trauma can no longer be considered as a taunting feeling that can destroy even the present and future of an individual. It gives the power to draw new patterns of the meaning making process. Going through a traumatic

experience will definitely make an impact of psychological shock and rather than in taking it as a negative drive, the attributes of trauma can be used for re-experiencing identity.

Every day we hear grimmer news that suggests we move through the winter of the world. Everywhere man is tormented, the cosmos is filled with bloodshed and the terrors of treachery and we cannot predict the answers of our future. Yet we understand that when time's winged chariot approaches, the reel of the globe will automatically

roll and we can only be the spectators who have to embrace the inevitable fragments of ordeal. But there are certain possibilities through which those haunting experiences can be transformed to trigger the lost identity.

Richard Flanagan, one of the finest Australian novelists has discussed on the Australian chaos incorporating the mental agony and the quest for re-establishing their lost cultural genealogy. In a debut novel from Tasmania, *Death of a River Guide*, a dying man is haunted by a swirl of ancestral secrets. Protagonist Alijaz's ancestral secrets – miscegenation, convicts in the family and get a legacy of violence are of course the secrets of Tasmanian history. In the 19th century, the island was settled by criminals, often against their will, becoming home to the most brutal and desolate prison in the British Empire. The island's Aborigines were hunted, herded onto reservations and by the 1850's all but eradicated. Thus their past is haunted and traumatic. Giving a narrator the freedom to beam up stories from anywhere in time and space is a potent and liberating device for an artist with a strong vision and tight focus. The book struggles to capture Tasmania on the page and every detail is working to that end. Granted the legendary ability of drowning men to see their life flash in front of them, Alijaz envisions his life, the lives of his parents and also of his ancestors. The story is told in flashbacks. The visions that he gets comprise a richly layered narrative that leaps among such events and experiences as Alijaz's own birth, his troubled youth and Flagan mixes these heady materials skillfully, focusing on illustrations of the inherited rootlessness and restlessness that have shaped the protagonist. And the narrative is enlivened by such magical – realist particulars as a funeral at which the crucified Christ appears to bleed, and the spectacle of a bedspread permanently stained by a woman's tears.

The second novel, *Sound of One Hand Clapping* is about an unhappy woman, Sonja Buloh who returns to remotest Tasmania to revisit scenes of her tortured childhood and to have a baby. Much of Flagan's story is in flashback, being comprised of the tale, set in 1954, of Sonja's father Bojan and his wife Maria. Bojan and Maria are immigrants

Slovenians who immigrated to Australia so that Maria could work on backcountry hydroelectric projects, then touted as the great precursor to prosperity much as such project were in the American West. Maria however is bored and unsatisfied with her life and wanders off to her death in blizzard, leaving Bojan to raise Sonja alone. He is a sentimental man who loves to work with wood, but he is also afflicted by his memories of war and by his eternal grieving for Maria. Upon her return, nevertheless, daughter and father become reconciled; it is almost as if Sonja is the reappeared Maria, and her baby Sonja's own infant self itself. Everyone is given another chance. Even the land reverts to its primitive state, the dam breaking at last in concert with these revitalized lives, as if its violation of nature had caused human woes, too.

In the third novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Flanagan juxtaposes horror and love in a contrast that is so stark it can leave a reader breathless. From the opening, the novel jumps from past to present, from moment to moment, country to country with the ease of memory. A sophisticated form that asks attention from the reader, for if they are not careful, like memory, the prose could blur together. As the story progresses it settles, and this fluidity with chronology allows for the juxtapositions that give the novel its power. The telling of Dorrigo Evans, the main character, as a doctor in a prisoner of war camp on the line, is disturbing and vivid. In opposition to its hellish setting, much of the novel unfolds as a love story of epic, Grecian proportions, set in beachside Adelaide. The story does turn on the power of a poem or a letter and this power of language is returned with a rhythm that is poetic. At moments throughout the story, books and poems become talisman. They hold a power over life and death. It also provides a link between Australians and the Japanese in a story that considering the subject matter, could easily have fallen into the realm of black and white, good and bad.

These three novels hold the perfect characteristics of displacement and the followed trauma. But the characters survive from their taunting past because they tried to change their post traumatic stress to post traumatic growth. Everyone has a second chance. But it is important to

understand and analyze how to turn the negative into positive to build up a perfect future. Re-experiencing trauma is indeed an astringent experience but its power to retort those broken fragments are always a mystery. It is true that traumatic experiences are near to death moments and they can gift nothing but misery and recurring images of anguish. When an individual tries to alter and overcome the effect of trauma, his conscience is deliberately trying to change the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder into Post Traumatic Growth. One's ability to bridge the gap between PTSD and PTG determines his accomplishment to overcome trauma and the re-establishment of genealogy, identity and the final reconciliation.

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