

History, Memory and Displacement: A Postcolonial Study of The Sound of One Hand Clapping

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ABSTRACT

Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997) is a significant Australian novel that explores migration, displacement, memory, trauma, and the difficult construction of identity in a post-war multicultural society. Set in Tasmania, the novel centres on Bojan Buloh and his daughter, Sonja, Slovenian migrants whose lives are profoundly shaped by the violence of European history and the experience of resettlement in Australia. The novel moves between different periods of Sonja's life, revealing how individual memory is inseparable from historical trauma. Through its fragmented narrative structure, silences, flashbacks, and representations of landscape, Flanagan demonstrates that migration does not necessarily end displacement. Instead, geographical movement may reproduce psychological, cultural, and emotional forms of exile. A postcolonial reading of the novel reveals the tensions between homeland and host country, European history and Australian identity, belonging and alienation, and personal memory and collective history. The Buloh family's experience also complicates conventional understandings of Australian multiculturalism by demonstrating that migrants carry histories that cannot easily be assimilated into the dominant national narrative. This article argues that Flanagan uses the experiences of Bojan, Maria, and Sonja to examine how historical violence survives through memory and the body, and how confronting the past becomes necessary for the recovery of identity and belonging...

Keywords: Richard Flanagan, The Sound of One Hand Clapping, postcolonialism, history, memory, displacement, migration, trauma, identity, Tasmania...

INTRODUCTION

Richard Flanagan is one of the most important contemporary Australian writers whose fiction frequently engages with history, landscape, memory, violence, and questions of identity. His novels often challenge simplified versions of Australian history by bringing marginalised experiences into literary representation. *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, published in 1997, focuses on a Slovenian migrant family in Tasmania and examines the consequences of war, migration, and cultural displacement across generations. The novel centres on Bojan Buloh, his wife Maria, and their daughter Sonja. Bojan and Maria arrive in Australia after the Second World War, carrying with them memories of European violence and displacement. Their new life in Tasmania does not erase their past. Instead, the unresolved trauma of the past continues to shape their relationships and their understanding of themselves.

The novel's historical setting is particularly significant. Bojan and Maria belong to the large population of Europeans who migrated to Australia in the decades following the Second World War. The novel's migrant experience is therefore connected to a wider Australian history of post-war migration. Flanagan places his characters within the Tasmanian hydroelectric construction environment, a setting that promises employment, stability, and a new beginning. Yet the physical landscape becomes a place of isolation rather than uncomplicated belonging. The Tasmanian wilderness contrasts with the European :

landscapes carried within the migrants' memories. The novel was published in 1997 and received major literary recognition, including the Victorian Premier's Prize for Best Novel. Scholarly studies have identified its central concerns as Slovenian migration, trauma, memory, diaspora, identity, and cultural displacement. A postcolonial approach to the novel is useful because postcolonial literature is deeply concerned with questions of displacement, identity, cultural negotiation, language, memory, and power. Although Bojan and Maria are European migrants rather than subjects of a conventional colonial relationship, their experiences illuminate the complexities of Australian multicultural identity. Their story also exists within the larger history of a settler-colonial nation. The migrant experience therefore intersects with questions about who is permitted to belong, whose history becomes part of the national story, and how different histories coexist within Australia.

The current article examines *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* through three interconnected concepts: history, memory, and displacement. It argues that Flanagan represents displacement not simply as geographical movement but as a continuing psychological and cultural condition. Memory becomes the mechanism through which history enters the present, while displacement becomes an inherited experience that affects the second generation. Through Bojan and Sonja, Flanagan demonstrates that the past cannot simply be left behind by crossing a national border.

The novel's historical background is essential to understand its treatment of identity. Bojan and Maria are Slovenian immigrants who arrive in Australia in the post-war period. Their migration is associated with the aftermath of European conflict, political violence, and displacement. Their decision to migrate is therefore not simply an economic choice. It is an attempt to escape the historical circumstances that have destroyed their sense of security. The novel places the Buloh family within the Australian migrant boom that followed the Second World War. The Australian post-war migration program brought more than two million Europeans to the country over two decades. Flanagan's novel examines the emotional consequences of this migration rather than presenting it simply as a successful national project.

This historical context allows the novel to challenge the idea that migration automatically produces a new beginning. From the perspective of the dominant national narrative, Australia may appear as a land of opportunity for European migrants. However, Flanagan presents a more complicated reality. The migrant brings the past into the new country. History travels with the individual.

A postcolonial reading therefore shifts attention from migration as physical movement to migration as an experience of cultural negotiation. The migrant exists between worlds. Bojan is geographically in Australia but psychologically connected to Europe. Sonja, born into the migrant experience, inherits a history that she does not fully understand.

The novel consequently explores what Homi K. Bhabha describes through concepts such as hybridity, cultural negotiation, and the "third space". Identity is not presented as something fixed between two clearly separated cultures. Instead, the migrant identity emerges through continual negotiation between past and present, homeland and host country. Bojan's identity remains marked by Europe even after years in Tasmania. His inability to completely integrate emotionally into his new environment illustrates the psychological dimension of displacement. The migrant is physically present but emotionally divided.

One of the most important features of *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* is the way history continues to exist within the present. Flanagan does not treat history as something finished or safely located in the past. Instead, historical events remain active through memory, behaviour, and relationships. Bojan's experience demonstrates this most clearly. His past cannot be separated from his present identity. His memories of war affect his emotional responses, his relationship with Maria, and his relationship with Sonja. His alcoholism and violence are not presented as isolated personal failures; they are connected to a history of suffering that he cannot successfully articulate.

The novel's treatment of history is therefore different from a conventional historical narrative. Instead of presenting a straightforward chronological account, Flanagan reveals history through fragments, memories, and emotional responses. The past appears gradually.

This technique is particularly important because trauma often resists conventional storytelling. A traumatic past may not be easily transformed into a coherent narrative. History in the novel is consequently not merely a series of dates and political events. It becomes an embodied experience.

Memory is central to the structure of *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*. Sonja's adult identity is shaped by memories of her childhood, although many of those memories are incomplete or obscured. Flanagan's narrative repeatedly moves between different moments in Sonja's life. The story includes different stages of her childhood and adulthood rather than presenting her life in a straightforward chronological order. This structure mirrors the instability of memory.

The fragmented structure is more than a stylistic experiment. It represents the fragmented consciousness of characters who cannot easily reconcile past and present. Sonja's memories are particularly important because her childhood is marked by absence. Her mother disappears when Sonja is very young. Her father becomes emotionally and physically violent. As a result, Sonja's understanding of her own identity becomes inseparable from unanswered questions. Memory therefore becomes both a source of pain and a means of recovery. At first, remembering the past threatens to reopen wounds. Yet

forgetting does not provide genuine freedom. Sonja's return to Tasmania demonstrates that geographical distance cannot eliminate psychological history. Her journey is consequently a journey into memory.

The idea connects the novel with trauma theory. Trauma frequently produces what may be called a disruption of ordinary temporal experience: the past returns unexpectedly into the present. In *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, the past repeatedly intrudes upon the characters' attempts to live in the present. Memory thus becomes a contested space.

Displacement is perhaps the most important postcolonial concept through which the novel can be interpreted. Bojan and Maria are displaced geographically, culturally, and psychologically. Their movement from Slovenia to Australia is motivated by the desire to escape the conditions of post-war Europe. Yet migration does not provide immediate belonging. The migrant must negotiate unfamiliar language, unfamiliar customs, unfamiliar landscapes, and unfamiliar social structures.

Bojan's experience illustrates this problem. He works in the Tasmanian hydroelectric environment, but employment does not necessarily produce emotional integration. He remains marked by his European past. The Tasmanian landscape is therefore both a new home and a space of alienation. The novel's remote setting intensifies this feeling. The construction camps and harsh weather conditions contribute to a sense of physical isolation. The landscape can appear beautiful, powerful, and sublime, but it can also be threatening. The migrant's relationship with the environment is consequently ambivalent.

The novel's treatment of displacement is also linguistic. Bojan's limited English and Sonja's limited knowledge of Slovenian create a communication gap between generations. Language therefore becomes a marker of cultural displacement. For Bojan, English represents the new Australian environment. Slovenian represents the cultural world he has left behind. Sonja occupies a more complicated position because she belongs to Australia while remaining connected to a Slovenian heritage that she does not fully understand. This produces a form of second-generation displacement.

Bojan is one of the most complex representations of migrant identity in the novel. His character demonstrates how historical trauma can become embedded within individual behaviour. Bojan arrives in Australia carrying memories of war. His inability to process those experiences contributes to his emotional instability. His relationship with alcohol becomes an attempt to escape painful memories. The significance of Bojan's alcoholism extends beyond individual psychology. It can be understood as a symptom of displacement. He has lost the social and cultural world in which his identity was originally formed, but he has not developed a secure sense of belonging in Australia. The Australian landscape does not automatically heal him. His relationship with his daughter Sonja is also deeply affected by his inability to communicate his past. Instead of explaining his suffering, Bojan often expresses it through anger and violence. Silence therefore becomes one of the defining characteristics of his identity.

A study of the novel's treatment of silence argues that trauma produces a rupture in the narrative of the self and can result in alienation and loss of self-expression. Bojan's masculinity is also significant. He is expected to perform the role of father, worker, and provider, but his emotional wounds make these roles difficult to sustain. His inability to articulate vulnerability transforms suffering into aggression. Flanagan thus complicates the image of the migrant father. Bojan is neither simply a victim nor simply an aggressor. He is simultaneously both. His violence damages Sonja, but his behaviour also emerges from historical suffering. The novel does not excuse his actions; rather, it situates them within a wider historical and psychological context.

Maria's character provides another important dimension to the novel's exploration of displacement. Her disappearance is one of the central events around which the narrative is constructed. Maria's decision to leave is often interpreted through the psychological pressures created by her past. Her memories of European suffering become associated with the Tasmanian environment. The new world does not completely free her from the old one. The physical landscape becomes a trigger for memory. This is significant from a postcolonial perspective because it challenges the idea of Australia as an uncomplicated "new world". For Maria, the Australian landscape contains reminders of the violence from which she has attempted to escape.

The novel therefore reverses the conventional migration narrative. Instead of moving from an old world of suffering into a new world of freedom, Maria discovers that trauma has followed her. Her death/disappearance also has a profound effect on Sonja. The absence of the mother becomes an emotional wound that shapes the daughter's adult identity. The maternal absence is therefore both personal and historical.

A study of the novel's representation of motherhood and trauma connects Maria's experience with the historical violence of Europe and the migrant condition in Tasmania. Maria's story demonstrates that displacement affects women differently from men. Her psychological suffering is intensified by isolation, motherhood, and the inability to establish a meaningful emotional relationship with her new environment.

Sonja represents the second generation of the migrant experience. Unlike her parents, she does not personally remember the European homeland in the same way. Yet she inherits the emotional consequences of her parents' history. Her identity is therefore constructed through fragments. Sonja grows up in Australia but is shaped by a European history that remains largely unspoken. She experiences the consequences of migration without fully possessing the memories that produced them. This creates an important paradox: Sonja remembers what she cannot fully remember. Her childhood memories contain gaps,

silences, and unanswered questions. The absence of her mother becomes a defining part of her identity. Her father's trauma becomes part of her emotional inheritance.

The above-mentioned incident is an example of postmemory, a concept associated with Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory describes the relationship of a later generation to traumatic experiences that occurred before its birth but were transmitted through stories, silences, images, and behaviour.

Sonja's experience can be understood through this framework. The European past becomes part of her identity even though she did not directly experience the historical events that shaped her parents. Her return to Tasmania therefore becomes significant. She is not merely returning to a geographical location. She is returning to the origin of her fragmented identity.

Language plays a crucial role in the novel because it determines who can speak, what can be remembered, and what remains hidden. Bojan's limited English creates a communication barrier between him and his daughter. Sonja, meanwhile, does not possess complete access to the Slovenian language and cultural world of her parents. The result is an intergenerational linguistic gap. This gap can be interpreted through a postcolonial framework because language is closely associated with cultural power. English functions as the dominant language of Australian public life, while Slovenian becomes increasingly marginal within the migrant family.

The inability to speak the same language symbolises a deeper inability to communicate experience. However, Flanagan does not portray silence simply as absence. Silence itself becomes meaningful. The characters' bodies, gestures, violence, memories, and relationships communicate what language cannot. This is especially important in relation to trauma. Traumatic experiences often resist ordinary narration. The survivor may know that something happened without being able to transform the experience into a coherent story. The novel's fragmented narrative form reflects this difficulty. Thus, silence becomes an alternative form of historical testimony.

The Tasmanian landscape is not merely a background in the novel. It participates actively in the representation of memory and displacement. Flanagan's Tasmania is remote, harsh, and powerful. The wilderness creates both beauty and danger. For the migrant characters, it becomes a place in which old memories interact with new experiences. The physical environment therefore becomes a kind of psychological landscape.

Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* offers a powerful exploration of history, memory, and displacement through the story of a Slovenian migrant family in Tasmania. The novel demonstrates that migration is not simply a movement from one geographical location to another. It is a complex psychological and cultural experience in which memories of the past continue to influence the present.

Bojan and Maria carry the trauma of European history into Australia. Their migration does not erase their memories of war, violence, and loss. Instead, those memories become embedded within their new lives. Sonja inherits the consequences of this history and experiences a form of second-generation displacement.

The novel's fragmented structure is particularly effective because it reproduces the instability of traumatic memory. The past emerges gradually, through fragments, silence, and recollection. In this way, Flanagan challenges the assumption that history is always accessible through a clear chronological narrative.

A postcolonial reading further reveals the importance of language, cultural identity, and belonging. Bojan's limited English and Sonja's incomplete connection to Slovenian culture create an intergenerational space of linguistic and cultural displacement. Their experiences demonstrate that belonging is not automatically produced by geographical settlement.

Tasmania itself becomes a significant site of memory. The landscape is simultaneously a new home and a reminder of displacement. Through the interaction between landscape and memory, Flanagan connects individual trauma with broader histories of migration and Australian nation-building. Most importantly, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* suggests that the past cannot simply be abandoned. Attempts to suppress history often intensify its psychological effects. Memory, although painful, can become a means of understanding and reconciliation. The novel therefore transforms the migrant experience into a larger meditation on identity and history. Bojan's displacement, Maria's trauma, and Sonja's search for understanding demonstrate that personal identity is constructed through relationships between past and present, homeland and host country, memory and forgetting.

Ultimately, Flanagan's novel suggests that belonging is not achieved by erasing the past but by acknowledging and negotiating with it. History remains present in the migrant body, memory remains active across generations, and displacement continues until the individual is able to confront the experiences that created it. In this sense, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* is not merely a story about Slovenian immigrants in Tasmania; it is a profound exploration of how individuals and communities carry history with them and attempt to make a home in the aftermath of displacement..

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