

## The Dilemmas of Contemporaneity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century English Literature

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### Abstract

#### **Bridging the past and present: Contemporaneity in Richard Flanagan's *Wanting***

Kiran Desai in her *The Inheritance of Loss* says that “The present changes the past.

Looking back you do not find what you left behind. ”A person’s past, present, and future are all interlinked and have a cause-effect relationship. The real meaning of a person’s life and behavior can be understood by his actions which he undertakes in the present. The term contemporaneity can be defined as the quality of being or existing in the same period of time. The paper aims to analyze *Wanting* (2008), of Man Booker Prize winner, Richard Flanagan in the light of Kurt Lewin’s ‘Contemporaneity Rule’. Kurt Lewin explains the concept of change and how that particular change is influenced by past and present actions. Contemporaneity rule makes use of the present incidents irrespective of its past or historicity or geographic locations. The study of contemporaneity helps one to understand and stay ahead of change. The paper explores the method and strategies employed by Flanagan in creating the contemporary effect in his novels.

Tino Sehgal defines Contemporaneity as “This is so contemporary: an immediate, instantaneous yet infinitely repeatable event, an intensely felt, personal and shared experience, one that is evidently open-future yet instantly readable, and singular while

also, apparently, resonant of a world much larger than that of art.” Tino Sehgal is a Berlin-based conceptual artist, he has written a book entitled *This is so Contemporary* (2003). His art takes the form of staging situations that raise

awareness of what to expect when events are encountered. It points to how strongly a setting such as an art gallery, and a set of expectations might shape the context of one's experience in such a place.

“Contemporary” becomes a keyword for these purposes when we recognize that it has an etymological depth, and an analytical potential, that now outmatches that of “modern.” In medieval Latin, contemporaries were formed from *con* (“together”) and *tempus* or *tempor* (“time”); in late Latin, this became *contemporaries*, then, in early seventeenth-century English, *contemporaneous*. Since at least that time, it has been capable of calibrating a number of distinct but related ways of being in or with time, even of being, at once, in and apart from time. Current editions of the Oxford English Dictionary give four major meanings. They are all relational, turning on prepositions, on being placed “to,” “from,” “at,” or “during” time. There is a strong sense of “Belonging to the same time, age, or period”, the coincidental, but also entangled sense of “Having existed or lived from the same date, equal in age, coeval” (2), and the most adventitious. The paper aims to analyze Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* (2008) in the light of Kurt Lewin’s Contemporaneity rule.

We take account only of what is contemporary that is existing at the same time or during the same time period while we accept the necessity of excluding events that regularly speaking belong to the past and future time. The purpose of such a diagnosis for scholarly practitioners of organizational development and change is to explain or predict a change in a certain situation. We do this by linking the change with the inter-connected, concrete conditions of the field at the time. (Lewin 211)

Richard Miller Flanagan is an Australian novelist from Tasmania. He was born in Langford, Tasmania in 1961, as the fifth of six children. He descended from Irish convicts transported during the great famine to Van Diemen’s Land. He grew up in a remote mining town of Roseberry on Tasmania’s western coast. His creative oeuvre includes nonfiction, fiction and film scripts in and around Tasmania. His major novels include *Death of a River Guide* (1994), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), *Gould’s Book of Fish: A Novel in Twelve Fish* (2001), *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006), *Wanting* (2008), *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. (2013) and *The First Person* (2017). His major nonfiction includes *A Terrible Beauty: History of the*

*Garden River Country* (1985), *The Rest of the World is Watching-Tasmania to the Greens* (1990), *Codename Iago: The story of John Friedrich* (1991), *Paris –Fed Bastards: A History of the Politics of the Unemployed in Britain 1884-1939* (1991) and *And What Do You Do, Mr. Gable?* (2016). A number of contributors note the imagery of the line and the circle in Richard Flanagan’s writing as different and definite forms of construing history, familiar native community and literary forms.

In the novel *Wanting* (2008) Flanagan has wrought together with the history of Tasmanian aborigines along with the life history of Charles Dickens. “We have in our lives only a few moments said Dickens. A moment of joy & wonder with another some might say beauty or transcendence. Then you reach an age, Miss Ternan & you realize that moment or if you are very lucky a handful of those moments was your life. That those moments are all & that they are everything” (168) The novel has won the Queensland Premier’s Literary Award for Literature, Tasmania Book Prize (2011), Western Australian Premier’s Literary Award (2014), New Yorker Notable Book of the year (2014). “THE WAR HAD ENDED as wars sometimes do, unexpectedly (*Wanting* 1).” The novel deals

with the history of Diemonian Natives, the black war and the miserable lives of the survivors who were Christianized. As a subplot, the life of Charles Dickens, his love for Ellen Ternon and his friend Wilkie Collins producing a play is taken parallel. The novel also throws light on the exploration of Sir Franklin. The connecting link among all these plots is an aboriginal girl called Mathinna. One of the aspects of Historiographic Metafiction is involving historical personae and historical background in the novel. Flanagan has wound the novel around great historical personae. They are Sir Franklin and his wife Lady Jane, Beloved novelist Charles Dickens, his friend John Foster. Flanagan has included various historical events like Polar Expedition, Black War, Dickens’ magic over theatre etc.

The Historical personae mentioned in the novel are as follows, Charles John Huffam Dickens created some of the world’s best known fictional characters and is regarded as one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian era. The range compassion and intelligence of the apprehension of his society and its shortcomings enriched his novels and made him both one of the great forces in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature and an influential spokesman of the consuetude of

the age. His notable works are *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectation*. Dickens is often described as using idealized characters and highly sentimental scenes to contrast with his caricatures and the ugly social truth he reveals. He is one of the most-read authors. His novels have never gone out of print. Flanagan has presented the real living Dickens before the readers. He discusses in detail Dickens' dedication to his writing, his mourning over Dora's death, his frustration with his wife and ten children, his friendship to Wilkie Collins, another famous novelist, his love for Ellen Ternan and his unfulfilled wanting to declare his love to her. Dickens also directs and acts in the play 'The Frozen Deep', and his acting reaches the zenith and he dies in the lap of his beloved confessing his love.

Wilkie Collins who was the close friend of Dickens also finds a role in *Wanting*. His famous works are *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armadale*, *The Moonstone*. Collins' work was classified as Sensation novels which is a precursor to detective and suspense novels. Flanagan has presented Collins as a foil to Dickens. He is his confidante, gets assistance from Dickens for

his play "The Frozen Deep." John Foster was an essayist and friend of Dickens. Flanagan makes use of this character to discuss polar exploration. Ellen Ternan also is known as Nelly Ternan was an English Actress. History mentions her as the mistress of Dickens. Here Flanagan presents her as Dicken's true love.

Sir John Franklin was an English royal navy officer. He served as Lieutenant Governor of Van Dieman's Land from 1837-1843. He disappeared on his last expedition attempting to discover Northwest Passage. The crew never returned. Flanagan takes these incidents and builds upon it. Here a thorough portrayal of his character is depicted. Sir Franklin is an explorer and finds it tough to be Governor. Lady Jane and he adopt Mathinna and in her uncontrolled wild spirit, he experiences freedom. He could not take Mathinna with them to London. And soon after he leaves for the exploration where he dies thinking about Mathinna, his daughter. "But he was south of no north now, and every compass point served on; to concentrate his thoughts more powerfully upon her. For it was Westby northwest or southwest or south – southeast, she was everywhere( *Wanting* 135)"

Jane Franklin was born on 4 December 1791, the daughter of John Griffin, silk weaver, of London. In 1828 she married John Franklin who was appointed lieutenant-governor of Van Dieman's Land in 1836. She was a woman of idealism and great mental activity, she was determined to assist her husband in governing the island rather than play the role of governor's wife. Under her influence, he founded in 1839 the society which became in 1848 the first royal society for the advancement of science outside Britain. In 1839 Lady Franklin bought 130 acres of land near Hobart Town for a botanical garden, to which she gave the name Ancanthe. It is a museum of natural history built on the model of the Greek temple. Lady Jane was an unrelenting force who propelled the search for her husband, along the way establishing herself as an important figure in the polar expedition of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jane Franklin was the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most famous widow, next only in public stature to Queen Victoria, wrote Amanda Johnson in the *Journal of the Association for the study of Australian literature*. Flanagan makes use of this strong Lady to bring a turning point in the novel. She acts as the connecting link among the characters. It was her idea to adopt Mathinna and bring her up as her daughter but when she fails in her task she

has to leave Mathinna behind. She is a shallow character who leads her life pretending. She wants to hold and caress the child, finds her hugs very soothing yet never mentions it. The title of the novel also narrates her longing to become a mother.

Humanitarian George Augustus Robinson was sent to launch a friendly mission to persuade Aboriginal people to surrender. The terms "Black war" and "Blackline" were coined by journalist Henry Melville in 1835 and historian Lyndall Ryan argued it to be known as Tasmanian War. The Presbyterian carpenter cum preacher called himself the Protector. The blacks were called wild blacks and were miserable. The Protector has induced fear in them and shifted them from Van Diemonian tribes from the mainland to the distant island. The protector started earning a salary of 1500 a year along with garrison of soldiers, a catechist and raising sable charges to the level of English civilization. He tried to preach them Christianity they bartered beads and tobaccos in exchange of skins and shell necklaces. But they were doing mysteriously their health deteriorating because of change in food patterns. The protector introduced them to flour, sugar and tea depriving them of their native diet of berries, plants, shellfish and games. "And

the more they took to English blankets and heavy English coats abandoning their licentious nakedness, they coughed and spluttered and died (2)". They wanted to move out of their English homes and return to their aboriginal way of living.

John Foster had received the unfortunate news of the death of Dora, Dickens's daughter but decided to delay conveying the news until Dickens had given his speech addressing General Theatrical fund. The child was sick and Foster wanted Dickens to postpone the speech. Yet the Dickens was obstinate. He took the news of her death calmly. Douglas Jerrold remarked London's Great exhibition as a crystal palace. Douglas as a ten-year-old boy had experienced the life of navy officers. He was upset and left to become a printer's apprentice. He raised as a drama critic through Sunday monitor his plays are *Paulpry* (1827), *Fifteen years of a Drunkard's life* (1828), *Black-Eyed Susan* (1827) *The Mutiny of the Nore* (1830), *The Prisoner of Ludgate* (1831). Jerrold's sympathy for the underdog and his strong criticisms of the Tories contributed to the fame of Punch Magazine. He was a great friend of Dickens and contributed to other journals and worked as a sub-editor of the Daily News.

Mathinna, the protagonist of the novel acts as the connecting link of both the plots of the novel. She was 7 years old she knew stories of spirits who could fly. She lived in the settlement of Wybalenna. Mathinna ran to the protector her christened name was Leda..the aborigines were dying of some mysterious cause. The protector who was a carpenter by profession had built new streets and buildings. The white settlers would shoot the blacks with glee as if they were hunting kangaroos. The aborigines died monstrous deaths and the protector knew he was somehow responsible for it. He would post mortem their bodies to find the cause of death this time it was for Mathinna's father.

Matthinna's father, king Romeo who had saved the protector from the flood "He realized king Romeo was breathing heavily, that the bleeding was pointless, that he wished to hurt the black man for his incurable illness, for all their incurable illnesses, for all their failures to allow him to cure them, to civilize them, to give them the chance no one else cared to give them(14)". He performed the surgical actions because the surgeon had died last month and they were awaiting replacement. In Wybalenna, The Protector and the Aborigines welcomed Sir John Franklin and Lady Jane. She is impressed by the

indefinable attitude of Mathinna. Lady Jane's inability to conceive created an interest in Leda. Leda, the original name of Mathinna, wore the necklace made of hundreds of tiny vivid green seashells threaded on several yards of possum linen. It belonged to her dead mother. Leda's dance intrigued Lady Jane to own her. Jane had married to better herself. John was dull whereas she was ambitious, they had a loveless marriage. His virtue was endurance. Two rules imposed upon the Aboriginals were

1. Plan to rid Van Diemen's Land of snakes by paying a shelling for every skin
2. Aboriginal settlement on Flinders Island

The Protector thinks of a friendly mission rather than his ambition. Trouterer was a strong aboriginal, he lived along with other natives. George Augustus Robinson went onto capture some remotest tribes captured none. He was about to give up but Robinson was reminded of his mission and he captured King Romeo and his friends. His chances to do something for his career appraisal. He woke up to discover the pistols he had carried kept in custody of tribals. Later that evening women, children and half his tribes had run deep into the forest. After three years the blacks who

hadn't been exterminated in the war were caught and sent to a holding camp on the flinders island that would become Wybalenna.

Robinson met Trouterer after a week the Black Ajax had brought Trouterer's daughter in a kangaroos skin and swung it around Robinson's chest. The Protector gave King Romeo's box-Van Diemonian Timber Huon Pine. The Governor and his wife adopted Mathinna.

Mathinna Flinders since she did not have a second name and since the captain felt one should have a second name also she came from flinders island and she possessed albino possum government house. Robinsons took several months sending this child because every time she went missing. then they shipped her on Cormorant. Lady Jane wanted to civilize the child in every way. With simple things like wearing shoes. Many Tutors like Karl grolz and Mr.Francis Lazurette who was a pantomime actor, a maniac, a dance but not tutor. Mathinna had lots of dresses but the red dress was her favorite. Mathinna had the largest & darkest eyes imaginable. And had learned odd art of playing the coquette, she was the most beautiful savage.

Mathinna was taken to the orphanage tortured, beaten in the punishment room the forest behind was burnt children nearly choked yet few more died & Mathinna was thrashed again & she refused to eat for a day & a night & started eating insects. Lady Jane visited Mathinna. She wished to take Mathinna with her but something stopped her. She wanted to comfort her & knew 'mothers love for a child yet her realization'" that her great experiments were the most ignominious failure & that she must not suffer the further humiliation of taking Mathinna home to England(195)."The dance had left the dancer(196)".

Lady Jane met Dickens and requested him to write an answer to John Rae's report stating that the mighty adventurer including Sir John would have been prey to Cannibalism. Dickens's article 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers' was published in Household Words. He was obsessed with Rae's report on Little Dorrit. Dickens read a whaling Captain's description of a ship struck between the two masses of ice joined together. He along with Wilkie Collins planned to play the role of Richard Wardour, the villain of Little Dorrit in their new play 'The Frozen Deep'. Dickens's mind was engaged in bringing this play to a conclusion. He wanted to redeem Wardour

when he sacrifices his life for his rival. Dickens thought of staging it in front of a larger audience. He needed professional actresses. And he chose Mrs. Ternan and her three daughters. Dickens was obsessed with Ellen Ternan. Wilkie had said "He lived as He acted" (162) The dialogues written in the same style of Dickens Flanagan writes from Dickens's mind.

Edward Kerr, an agent of Van Diemen land company had come to warn him and to tell him that killing black people was his duty and one is appointed on that lonely island to move on. Sir John felt that he was no more a slave to other divisions, he decided that it would be inappropriate to take Mathinna to London and would leave her at St. John orphanage. Mathinna was taken away the previous day itself without the knowledge of Lady Jane. The orphanage had illegitimate children or unlucky with careless parents. They were cold broken and beaten. Typhoid attacks were frequent. They had church service warmth was a virtue, not the truth.

Mathinna spent some time in the orphanage and was later returned to Wybalenna the nature was glad at least one of their kids come back. But Mathinna was neither black nor white. She considered whites to be her kith and blacks were 'filthy strangers'. She was not interested in living. She was equal



to dead. She had neither passion nor spirit for living .she was in chaos with no will for living.

Walter Talba Bruney protested against the killing of the black. Three years passed- Robinsons black slaves had broken free and came to Wybalenna. Mathinna tried to convince black women that their ways are wrong but at night she enjoyed the devil dance. Walter was made the publisher of Flinders Island Chronicle. Only 47 Van Diemonian natives left. Mathinna who was fifteen was sent to an orphanage after 6 months she was sent to work for a seamstress Mrs. Dellacorte. She owned a grog shop at night. Mathinna acquired habit for rum and tea spiced with cinnnamon. Over the course of time, Mathinna had pox general itching and lice. Francis Lazarette, her previous tutor met her and she was thrown out of the household. Mathinna was haunted by the memory of her people. “She roams the streets as if it were all a dream. (227)”. Mathinna started trading body because the only work she knew was little writing and quadrille this was what she had learned. Robinson had come to meet the black Princess. He died on Oct 1866. Mathinna died at the age of 29. Her body was found by the old sled bearer.

“Ruin ought to be if ruin must come, ruinously worthwhile(205) ”. Nell returned the diary and she wanted to become a part or benefactor of the great legend. By the second day, the companionship of Ellen and Dickens grew. Dickens portrayed the magnificent character on the stage. On the third day after a light talk, he sent her a card stating he inspired his work which had become dull, inactive and stressful because of his degraded life. She read the card yet didn’t burn it. The final performance was staged and Lady Jane had come to Grand Western Hotel to witness the drama. In the very last scene, the character Wardour and Dickens himself die in Ellen Ternan’s arms. Here Flanagan moves away from the original history.“He had come here by chance coincidences were bringing him to his destiny and yet as in his stories, he knew there was no coincidence in this world that the purpose of everything in ultimately revealed (239)”

“Occurring at the same moment of time, or during the same period; occupying the same definite period, contemporaneous, simultaneous” (3). In each of these three meanings there is a distinctive sense of presentness, of being in the present, of beings that are present to each other, and to the time that they happen to be in while also

being aware that they can live their lives in no other.

Terry Smith defines “the multiplicity of ways of being in time, at the same time as others, right now, but also at earlier and future times, in ways that open us to other, non-modern temporalities (including Indigenous knowing), and to other kinds of time. This possibility has been present since the first sentient making of distinctions of any kind. Therefore, by bringing the element of contemporaneity, Flanagan has truly aimed for the world audience. By merging Charles Dickens’ story with that of Mathinna and her history, he set up the familiar stage for the world audience. In designing the portal for a change in literature, the contemporaneity rule helps to understand the causal reason for the change and also assist in amalgamating the psychology as well as other need of the change in that particular situation.

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