

‘Representation of Region and Nation in Literary and Culture Studies’ Conference
University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu February 2009

Plenary

'The (Hydro)power Relations within Nation and Region, and the (de)formation of
Identity in the case of Richard Flanagan'

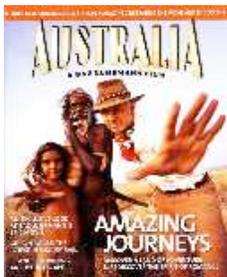
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Key words in the conference theme, such as Nation and Region, require an engagement with politics; I am not a political scientist. And it would be foolish to try and engage with the politics of a multiple India given that I am amongst experts. So I'll engage with the historical and literary politics of a specific bioregion of Australia. Though you might ask yourself why on earth would the good people of Chennai be interested in such a topic? It's a fair question. Are Australian literary politics so remotely different from the South Indian context that I currently find myself in? It's my hope that readers will recognise (tragically) that parallels do exist. So in order to provide some sort of comparative framework I will begin—despite the presence of experts—with the local.

This Sunday's 'Magazine' section of *The Hindu* (8 February 2009) was primarily concerned with the attempted subordinating and silencing of highly encoded bodies (i.e., female). The incidents that sparked the Magazine's focus on freedom of speech included the 'moral policing' by the Sri Rama Sene, and their violent action towards women in a Mangalore pub; the report on the abduction of a Hindu girl for speaking with a Muslim boy; and the pending Supreme Court decision in the 2005 Mumbai closure of bars, which saw thousands of dancing women unemployed. 'Suppressing people with different ideas is a form of violence' stated 'The Ahimsa Way' column in the Magazine (Jesudasan: 'Voices of Dissent' 4).¹

This paper addresses overt and covert forms of violence and the suppression of dissent at the level of Region and Nation as portrayed in literature and popular culture, and the subsequent '(de)formation of Identity in the case of Richard Flanagan.' The paper is primarily descriptive rather than analytic; and its approach is biocritical in its use of texts to comment on history and on the biography of the author.

The nation in question is Australia. The identity, or rather, the image of 'Australia' is reproduced in Baz Lurhmann's 2008 film of the same name.



The front cover of a Tourism Australia special in the *Weekend Australian Magazine* foregrounds Indigenes—projections of an ancient wisdom gained from an association with wide desert spaces and deep ancient lineage. Beside them, leaning into the camera, is a white settler male. An unkind reading would see his protective (patriarchal?) gesture as one that promises right-minded thinking on

¹ Jesudasan lists Medha Patkar, Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy, Aruna Roy, and Binayak Sin as important voices of dissent.

behalf of the weak and vulnerable; his Akubra hat (fitted out with what appear to be crocodile teeth) lends itself to a Barthean reading of white-fella toughness where frontier and settlement constitute the 'knowledge' of land lore. Cartography [PPP map of Australia] is less open to readerly prejudices, also offers up images of distance, deserts, drought, dust—all of which contribute to the familiar image of hardship associated with the white settler farmer as a battler on the landscape.

But Australia is more than the large space that the eye is drawn to; being a post-modern reader, your eye is already scanning the margins, checking the periphery, and is acutely aware of the island state of Tasmania at the bottom of the map. This is the 'region' under discussion where battles of another kind are being fought on the landscape. The entire state is classified as regional by the Federal government, both denotatively and connotatively. Tasmania though participates in a different set of images from Mainland Australia, two in particular.

The first is historical. Settled as a penal colony in the early nineteenth century, 'white fella toughness' is the sociological inheritance of the island's convict descendents. The second is geographical, where Gondwanaland, the land before continental drift, is the natural inheritance of the island's flora and fauna.



Both of these images contribute to the identity of the author in question, Richard Flanagan, one of the scriptwriters for 'Australia.' For him these twin images (the legacy of convict rule with its brow-beaten convicts and authoritarian Commandants; and the legacy of a unique bioregion viewed overwhelmingly by the Commandants as God-forsaken and therefore a fitting place for a prison) reveal systemic flaws that have, historically, contributed to abuses of power practiced by a series of deeply corrupt local governments. Nevertheless, Flanagan, who was born in 1961, is fiercely proud of being Tasmanian. Such a proclamation is more than parochialism; it's an acknowledgement of pride, not of shame, in being a descendent of an Irish convict. By implication, claims of convict ancestry participate in a discourse of victimage; Flanagan's settler status is a result of transportation and exile, and thereby evades the politics of white invasion. His ancestral-convictism informs his anti-authoritarian politics, in which his class politics were sharpened during his period as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford where, he says, he was expected to despise his origins. Instead he stresses his blue collar status by pointing to his convict origins, to being one of six children, to being brought up in the mining district of the wet and wild west coast, and to leaving school at 16.

In one of those curious incidents that reveal connectedness, not isolation, is the rule, the invitation to present this paper arrived at my home in Tasmania at the time when one of India's countrymen was tragically taken on Tasmania's west coast (on 9 Jan 2009).

Soldiers identify dead mate

DAMIEN BROWN

THE colleagues of an Indian Army soldier who drowned in the Franklin River last Friday had the grim task of identifying his body yesterday.

The body of Kailash Rana, 26, was freed from the wild rapids at The Cauldron that claimed his life during a military training exercise.

Tasmania Police search and rescue inspector Brian Edmonds said even though the body was located on Sunday, officers were unable to retrieve it until the river level dropped yesterday.

"By about 10am the river level had dropped sufficiently for police to mount an intricate helicopter recovery operation," Insp Edmonds said. "A specialist police team was winched on to

a rock ledge in The Cauldron.

"They used roping techniques to secure themselves. The body was then recovered and secured, before the helicopter returned to the rock ledge to winch the team to safety."

Mr Rana's body was then flown to the Royal Hobart Hospital and the coroner opened an investigation.

His four army colleagues as well as Australian soldiers who were with the Indian officers returned to Hobart in a bus at 2.30pm.

They went to the Hobart police station to make statements then to the hospital to identify Mr Rana's body.

The High Commission of India yesterday confirmed plans were under way to return the sol-

dier's body to his family.

High Commission defence adviser Jatinder Singh travelled with the army group and had been in Tasmania since Mr Rana's death.

"We are very happy we have been able to recover the body but this has been a very tragic time for the family and his fellow officers," Capt Singh said.

The officers described their colleague as a talented and caring young man.

Insp Edmonds paid tribute to the large number of people involved in the search, including kayakers and the helicopter crew.

"The retrieval was a particularly complex operation that required significant planning and the skills of expert search and rescue officers."



GRIM TASK: An Indian army officer goes to the hospital yesterday to identify the body of his colleague. Picture: JAMES KERR



CRASH COURSE: Rafters negotiate the wild rapids of The Cauldron.

'Nasty piece of aquatic mayhem'

DAMIEN BROWN

IT stirs fear in many and has become one of the most renowned and dangerous legs of the world-famous Franklin River — it's The Cauldron.

Travel writer Carl Roe describes the section of wild rapids as "a nasty piece of aquatic mayhem and the final obstacle in the Great Ravine".

Its massive boulders range up to the size of a Metro bus.

Rafting Tasmania's Graham Mitchell says the Franklin River's Great Ravine section consists of four major rapids:

- The Churn, which requires rafters to disembark and walk around it (portage).
- The Coruscades, passable by water on some occasions.
- The Thunderush, which is occasionally passable by water.
- The Cauldron.

Mr Mitchell said a guide had remarked only last week that this year he had been able to cross The Cauldron for the first time in seven years.

"Without the level of water coverage you are just going to smash into the boulders, there are just too many of them," he said. "When we take people past The Cauldron and have to portage, the guide actually has to choreograph the feet movements of the people."

"It is very dangerous."

26 year old Kailash Rana had been out on military exercises, white-water training with other Indian and Australian soldiers ('The Mercury,' 15 January 2009, 10). His kayak tipped at one of the most treacherous parts of the Franklin River, called The Cauldron; he drowned, and his body was recovered a week later. One of those commenting on the severity of the rapids was Graham Mitchell, who, in 1985, held the hand of a fellow river guide (Julian Webber) as his body, wedged between rocks at The Cauldron, his head beneath the water, slowly drowned.

This is the incident foregrounded in Richard Flanagan's novel *Death of a River Guide* (1994; hereafter DORG); narrated as interior monologue, the drowning man (Aljaz Cosini) tells his story as his life flashes by him.² Strictly speaking, he doesn't actually 'tell' his story, because he's gagged by drowning. And this gagging by being drowned out is a recurrent motif, connected to one of Flanagan's primary concerns, the freedom of speech.³

I said that Tasmania was settled as a penal colony. For Flanagan, the current Tasmania government still operates under the colonial, Commandant model, a model that silences and subordinates. During the 19th century, concrete examples include Official Order No

² Flanagan has also experienced being trapped underwater at the Franklin in 1983. He mentions this in an ABC Interview, 'A Letter from Richard Flanagan—Transcript'.

³ Another important image in Flanagan's oeuvre has to do with the potentially restorative act of holding hands—an act of connecting with another human being at the simplest of levels. Thus the scene with the two guides in DORG; the increased isolation of the now limbless weedy seadragon in GBF; the isolation implied in the title 'The Sound of One Hand Clapping', and so on.

41, which silenced convicts by forbidding them to write for the press. Other forms of expression, such as fiddling and dancing and singing, were also silenced by Governor Denison (in 1848) ‘because of their subversive nature’ (DORG 256).

Thus, the state’s history of gagging or silencing is frequently portrayed in Flanagan’s novels through the dominant metaphor of drowning. For instance in his inscrutable novel, *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) the story of Gould the convict artist is thrashed out against the politics of legitimated cruelty during the colonial era when the Commandants ruled a compliant people ‘unfree, imprisoned, entombed.’ The artistic expression of William Gould is permanently silenced when he turns into a Weedy Seadragon (part of the inscrutability)—which means he can no longer paint as a form of expression, and he’s also utterly incapable of communicating with any species. The artist’s story and radicalism is literally ‘drowned’ out by water, the very element that made the island a perfect prison.

And water, of course, is one of the natural resources that differentiates Tasmania from its Big Brother. An earlier, less inscrutable novel, although a koan—as signalled in the title, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997)—was transformed into a film (in 1998), with Flanagan as writer and director. Set partly in 1954, archival footage (from Butler’s Gorge) is included to show the building of one of the many hydro-electric dams constructed in Tasmania.

Once again, Flanagan takes an image of a subordinated person; here Bojan Buloh is a post-war Slovenian migrant brought in to labour on the dam. His wife, disenfranchised historically, geographically, and linguistically, hangs herself, leaving her young daughter a legacy of silence (‘she never speaks’ 83). The immigrant’s insignificance in the name of national progress is accentuated by the backdrop of the dam; the ‘wog’ immigrant is Tasmania’s 20th century underclass. They’re not convicts, though ‘[t]heir life echoed that of colonial convicts, with a similar pattern of perseverance as against disintegration in the outcome’ (Roe 351). Like the convicts, the migrant labourer ‘broke stone as if it were his own mind’ (64). But instead of the colonial Commandants in power, it’s the Hydro-Electric Commission, an autonomous authority of the Tasmanian government.⁴

The post war ethos was one of recovery through rebuilding and stimulating the economy. The Tasmanian government reasoned that Government-subsidised cheap energy would attract industry and stimulate the economy. It did; it attracted heavy industry but then the bulk consumers⁵ (zinc; aluminium; newsprint; pulp) made it clear ... that they needed more power supplies and more subsidies or there’d be no expansion which, they argued, translated into fewer jobs (Lowe 11).⁶ What’s happening here is that if Industry is the tail, and Government the dog, the tail is wagging the dog.⁷

⁴ Legislation was approved in 1944, under the Cosgrove Labor Government. The minister administering the Hydro-Electric Commission ‘was answerable in Parliament for its activities’ (Lowe 6).

⁵ These consumers included Electrolytic Zinc Co; the Australian Newsprint Mills, Associated Pulp and Paper Mills, Australian Aluminium Production omission, and Tasmanian Board Mills.

⁶ Doug Lowe was the Tasmanian Premier at the time.

⁷ Flanagan does have kind words for the vision, through the HEC, of the ALP: ‘We would do well to acknowledge that the vision of hydro-industrialisation represented an attempt by the ALP to wed its ideal

So when the Hydro-Power set its sights on a *National Park* (i.e., one that belongs to the people of the Nation, not just Tasmanians), the then Premier Reece remarked that in order to satisfy industry demands there ‘would be some modification to the Lake’ (Lowe 25). The Premier approached the *Federal Government* for funds;⁸ in effect Region and Nation were responding to private Industrial interests through subsidisation, and the handing over of natural resources.

The Premier’s ‘modification’ turned out to be a euphemism: this ancient lake 300 metres above sea level, shaped by the retreating Ice Age, containing rare plants and aquatic species, was flooded.⁹ The questionable legality of the Power Commission flooding a National Park—which in theory belongs to the nation’s people—was dismissed by the Premier who argued that flooding would provide more jobs for people, even if the people [and leading scientists] didn’t want the flooding.¹⁰ Two Tasmanians on board a plane en route to the Nation’s Capital to protest against the lack of democratic process, disappeared over the Bass Strait, and so were ‘silenced’ forever.¹¹

Philosopher Peter Singer called the lake ‘one of Australia’s first great national environmental controversies’ (Brown and Singer 68). But it wasn’t just an environmental controversy—basic democratic processes were at stake: the lake was drowned despite its so-called protection as a National Park, despite worldwide protest. Imagistically it represents the drowning of the powerless and speechless by the non-negotiable joint powers of industry and government. It confirmed the Commandant model of silencing and suppression. But the conflict over this regional lake also laid the foundations for the World’s first Green Party.

A decade later, the Franklin River was also slated for damming. It’s on the Franklin that Flanagan’s novel *Death of a River Guide*, is set, and where recently the young Indian officer lost his life. In the novel the drowning man recounts how he’d watched the rivers drown ‘without helping them. He watched the Murchison River drown and he watched the Mackintosh River drown and he watched the Pieman River drown’ and ‘he did nothing’ (252-253).

The attempt to drown the Franklin River (in 1982) resulted in the arrest of 1400 artists, writers, and people from across the world, in the blockade to prevent Tasmania’s last

of a better world, where all people would live decently, to the development demands of the capitalist system’ (‘Masters of History’: 125-126).

⁸ \$47 million towards the construction of Stage 1 of the Gordon River Power Development (Lowe 25).

⁹ For a local (Indian) perspective on the politics of dams, the removal of communities, the flooding of settlements, and the effects on regional drinking water supplies, see Vandana Shiva’s ‘Water Wars.’

¹⁰ ‘The ‘saving’ of the Franklin also saved the State a debt of \$2 billion with associated interest payments, and consequent loss of jobs as power costs inevitably escalated. The South West now produces a significant part of the State’s tourist revenue with more than 100,000 tourists a year visit Strahan to see the Gordon River and travel the Abt Railway to Queenstown. Indeed, the commercial promise, rather than the impassioned protests, may be the main reason the Franklin has survived in its natural state’ (Haynes 283)

¹¹ The disappearance of the Tiger Moth piloted by Max Price with passenger Brenda Hean on 8 September 1972 en route to Canberra to skywrite, failed to make it to Flinders Island to refuel.

wild river¹² from being dammed.¹³ This time the group had the numbers, and the legal knowledge to take on the State Government, *and* to represent a significant swing vote at the Federal level, and then to finally win a High Court decision¹⁴ to save the river (in 1983).¹⁵ The Greens became the third party in a previously two-party system and held the balance of power in the Tasmanian Government. Where was Flanagan? Like the character in the novel, he wasn't out saving the river: he was preparing to take up a Rhodes Scholarship in Oxford at the time.

On his return he would gain his voice amongst a new-found confidence that public dissent was finally possible in the State.

But the Commandant model was to hold true to form. In the 21st century, again in the name of employment and again without due consultation, an assault on another natural resource followed; this time it was Tasmania's ancient rainforests. A company named Gunns—maintaining a close relationship with government ministers in Forestry—is the largest chipper of hardwood in the Southern Hemisphere, and all its wood is from the island.¹⁶ An ex-Premier is a Gunns Director, another ex-Premier is a Chairman, both are stock holders—in a company heavily subsidised by the state government (i.e., the people of Tasmania).

With the proposed logging of the Tarkine wilderness¹⁷ in which roads for the logging trucks would be paid for by the taxpayer, where sections of old growth forest would be clear felled, wood-chipped, and the scrub napalmed, Flanagan spoke out, publicly declaiming the state government and its relationship with Gunns. And he did so through Art: he used the State Government's richest literary award (The Tasmanian Pacific Fiction Prize, valued at AUS\$40,000) as leverage.

He persuaded Peter Carey (with his entry *True History of the Kelly Gang*) and Tim Winton (and *Dirt Music*) to withdraw in protest against forestry practices. One of the judges, Professor Henry Reynolds, noted in despair that 'This is the first time an attempt has been made to get at a state government by trying to destroy a literary prize' ('The Examiner,' 2 March 2003, 11).

¹² The definition of a wild river adopted for the project emphasised the absence of alteration to the biological, hydrological, and geomorphological processes associated with river flow by modern or colonial society.

¹³ The Tasmanian Government put two dam sites to a referendum, 'the first in Australian history without the provision to say no' to the building of either dam (Lines 253).

¹⁴ Not only citizens could appeal—*speak out*—to the High Court for reassessment of their case, but *landforms* also. (Haynes 283).

¹⁵ Prime Minister Bob Hawke 'upheld this as a justifiable exercise of Federal power to implement *international* agreements (in this case the World Heritage Convention), [and] to control corporations (the HEC) (Haynes 283).

¹⁶ Gunns has largely bought out its competitors, is clear-felling temperate rainforests, planting pine plantations, and until recently 'protecting' its pine trees with (the recently banned) 1080 poisoning that kills indiscriminately; it also conducts aerial spraying of Atrazine, which drifts into neighbouring streams and is found in the drinking water of East Coast Tasmanians.

¹⁷ Tasmania is the only state in Australia that allows rainforest logging (Wilderness Society, 12)

The publicity increased a month later when a portrait of Flanagan won the National government's prestigious Archibald Prize.¹⁸ Flanagan was now a visual as well as vocal presence in his questioning of corrupt Forestry practices. The policies of regional Tasmania were now under national scrutiny. On World Environment Day, 2004, people gathered across the country to get the attention of the Federal Government; 15,000 gathered in Melbourne displaying a banner 'Tasmania's Forests: A Global Treasure. A National Disgrace.' Celebrity speakers included singers Jimmy Barnes and Paul Kelly, and Richard Flanagan.

So why then, when he was beginning to command national attention as an environmental spokesperson did Flanagan publish the novel *The Unknown Terrorist* (2005)? Dedicated 'For David Hicks' (the Australian previously held at Guantanamo Bay for his association with Al'Qaeda), the novel is set against a climate of fear, initiated by the Bali bombings and the killing of a number of Australians. Australia passed its anti-terror laws in 2005. It's written from the point of view of The Doll, a Sydney pole dancer, who, guilty by association, becomes public enemy number one and undergoes systematic character assassination by individuals in positions of trust.

Why write this novel? Apart from the fact that it deals with Flanagan's central subjects—the misuse of political power; fear as a weapon to paralyse subjects; the gagging of dissent—Flanagan was also undergoing public vilification in his home state. '[W]hen Flanagan launched an attack on the Tasmanian government over its logging and gambling policies,' he was called a coward, and 'traitor to Tasmania' by a member of the Tasmanian Parliament; the Premier stated there was no place for Flanagan and his fiction in the 'new Tasmania' (Moss 2007).

Flanagan's identity as a Tasmanian was deemed irrelevant by the government; he was reviled, a *persona non grata*, subjected (like The Doll) to character assassination. 'I realized then that what was happening in a very small way to me was happening in a much larger, more horrific way to people around the world,' says Flanagan, 'and when it happens to you it is a really shocking thing. A number of people say to me, "Of course they're going to do it and you shouldn't worry about it," but it is a terribly disturbing thing to have happen to you, and you do feel something fundamental has been taken from you' (Moss 2007).

Biocritically, the novel is written by the author in exile; the assumption of the heavily encoded female narrative voice indicates the level of psychological distress made more evident with the character's morally encoded occupation as a pole dancer. Says Flanagan, 'Pole dancers seem to attract an incredible contempt from both men and women, so it was a convenient place to start. It's good to have a character about whom people will arrive at an immediate judgment and that allows you then to take the reader to a different place. You can make them realise that perhaps their judgment was wrong, and perhaps the other judgments they live with are also as ill-based' (Moss 2007).

¹⁸ The winning entry was by Geoff Dyer, who served as the model for the convict artist, Gould, in Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*.

He takes his hard-working and highly skilled character—as Flanagan found out when he tried pole-dancing—who has no more ambition than to save enough for a down payment on an apartment, and he sets her up against grandiose ambitions and covert corruption, in the form of a Federal Agent and a journalist.

Preconceptions, based on name-calling, imprison all parties—be they pole-dancers, or ‘environmentalists’ for that matter. Such people remain images of ambivalence. And although Tasmanian environmentalists include abalone fishers, farmers, and vintners, who see their livelihood threatened by the current forestry situation, the unexamined image of ‘greenies’ as unwashed unemployed hippies still informs the prejudice of some policy makers.

For instance, in January this year, the state government placed its police force on a training alert against terrorism; when it created a scenario where the terrorists were forest environmentalists the government showed its pole-dancer prejudices and how out of touch it was with its constituents.

So, in or out of the novel, there’s not much an individual can do when a state government targets you for character assassination. Similarly, there’s not much the individual can do when targeted by a company like Gunns, which filed a ‘\$6.3 million claim against a group of conservationists, organisations, day protesters, an elderly woman who opposed logging in her district’ (‘The Monthly’ 24); [alleging] the group was joined in a ‘conspiracy guilty of the crime of corporate vilification’ (24). The group (known later as Gunns 20) were in effect gagged for speaking out against Gunns’ forestry practices.



One of those gagged in the inset picture [the mouth of each individual is taped shut] is Senator Bob Brown, Federal member for the Greens, gagged by a private corporation for doing his job and speaking out on behalf of his constituents. It’s a classic revisiting of colonial silencing of dissent. So far the case has been thrown out of court three time; but it’s ongoing.¹⁹ Had Gunns’ action been successful Flanagan writes that it would have ‘redefined the practice of democracy as the crime of conspiracy. An Australian would not have been able to criticise, question or campaign against a corporation, for risk of being bankrupted in legal proceedings brought against them by the richest and most powerful in their society’ (24). In such a scenario, my presenting this paper would make me liable to prosecution for criticising Gunns.

The lawsuit, however, was only part of a much larger plan: two days after issuing the writ (its intimidation strategy in place) Gunns announced its plans for one of the biggest pulp mills—in the world—to be built on the island, just outside the city of Launceston. Pulp mills, of course, require forests *and* water.

¹⁹ On March 16 2009 the Courts ordered Gunns to pay \$350,000 damages to the Wilderness Society.

In the processes leading up to assessing the environmental impact of the mill, one of the members of the Assessment panel, a former Supreme Court judge, resigned after being ‘leaned’ on by the previous Premier (Paul Lennon) who was eager to have the approval process completed *poste haste*. The government responded by putting in its own approval committee; very thoughtfully, Gunns’ lawyers helped the state government to draft legislation to approve the building of the pulp mill, despite a Tasmanian majority against the mill. The government, in readiness, instituted Section 11 of the Pulp Mill Assessment Act 2007, which prevents people ‘from seeking legal redress through the courts if they consider their business, health or land has been adversely affected by the mill.’

In other words it has legally gagged its constituents from voicing dissent; it has removed their basic right to a hearing in court. At this present time, Federal government and the Opposition practice professional ambiguity, extending time lines for the mill, approving construction, but not operation, and expressing interest only if there is environmental impact at the national level (i.e., mainland Australia). By his actions, Peter Garrett, the Minister for the Environment, implies that regional Tasmania is not entitled to the same protection as other states and territories that make up ‘the National’; at the environmental level Garrett ignores the basic ecological principle of interconnectedness by assuming that 65,000 tons of organochlorines that would be pumped daily from the mill into the Bass Strait will, somehow, stay contained; at the political level Garrett’s actions are an attempt to isolate and contain the corrosive effects of Tasmanian ‘democracy.’ Garrett can go along with silencing *Tasmanians* via Section 11, but at a National level? That would be preposterous. It might even be a case of the tail wagging the dog.

These then are some of the politics that have come to form an important part of Tasmania’s identity and Flanagan’s writerly concerns. His novels engage with the discourse of oppression as a form of political inheritance; they engage with the silencing of individuals through the use of fear practiced by officials in positions of power. These issues of course are not peculiar to regional Tasmania. With the boycotting of Tasmania’s literary prize, Flanagan demonstrated (rightly or wrongly) one way in which the regional novel can ‘literally’ impact beyond state, and National boundaries. Though it’s been noted that ‘Without his fame [as a writer] Flanagan’s writing on politics would not command the same degree of public attention’ (Brett Hutchins 2005).

But isn’t that the point? That celebrity status is itself a powerful political tool?



When I was in Chennai last year, these were the image makers who raised their voices and gave clarity and support to grass-root concerns that were being hampered by governmental obfuscations. On this visit, I see the Kannada poet Du Saraswati, speaking out against the Sri Rama Sene’s treatment of women in Mangalore; I see also the policing of dissent, with the tragic hacking to death of radio broadcaster Uma Singh just last month (on 15 January 2009; Sharma 3).

So it is a considerable irony that it is the so-called liars, the fiction writers and image makers from the movies—and let’s remember that this conference is just across from

Anna Square, and the heritage of CN Annadurai—that these people, through their art and profile, assumed responsibility for grass-roots advocacy and had the courage to speak out on issues of public concern at all levels of governance. ‘If I hadn’t said something, I would have been ashamed of myself’ said Flanagan (Hutchins 2005). To do nothing; to not speak out (gently, firmly, insistently), these perhaps are the crimes of this present moment.

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