

*Theme of Paranoia in Yann Martel's
The Facts Behind Helsinki Roccamatios
and Other Stories*

Chapter II

Theme of Paranoia in Yann Martel's *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories*

“The postmodern age is the age of paranoia” (Brenan 20).

The word ‘paranoia’ originated in Greek meaning ‘madness’. Lacan describes Paranoia as: “The especial delusion of the misanthropic *belle ame*, throwing back on to the world the disorder of which his being is composed” (Ecrits 17). The trauma of Second World War creates a kind of delusion that keeps people away from reality and results in paranoia. This kind of psychological disorder provokes mistrust. Medically defined paranoia is referred to someone who suffers from mental illness. Recently Paranoia is dealt in literary works as postmodern fiction focuses on the traumatic experience of the protagonists. “Paranoia is the threat of total engulfment with somebody else’s system, and is extremely felt by a large number of persons in postmodern fiction. It is speculated that this threat arises from the “climate of fear and suspicion” that was rampant and widely experienced by many over the course of the Cold War” (Sim 129).

Paranoia is greatly influenced by anxiety and fear. “Paranoid anxieties are represented in different ways, including; “The distrust of fixity, of being circumscribed to anyone particular place or identity,” the belief that society is “conspiricing against the individual,” and the proliferation of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others” (Sim 131). Paranoid individuals believe that they are in danger and threatened by people around them which make them feel insecure. They think that the world is constructed on lies and illusion. “Paranoia and Schizophrenia are modes of knowledge, or ways of interpreting

the world and viewing the self' (Flieger 87). Theme of Paranoia is prominent in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is narrated by Bromdon who is a patient in an Oregon psychiatric hospital for ten years. He suffers from hallucination and delusions. He has been in the ward for a longer period than anyone else in the asylum. The novel *The Crying of Lot 49* is about Oedipa Mass and death plays prominent role in the novel. Oedipa's quest started after the death of her ex-lover, Pierce Inverarity.

The postmodern narrative plays with intricate perspectives on a fairly simple story. It is a style and movement in art that features a deliberate mixing of different styles. It celebrates fragmentation and incoherence. The fragmentariness and decentredness of the postmodern subject is revealed through fragmented language. Psychological problems faced by the characters are the result of the paranoid world that the characters are in. The word 'Paranoid' is derived from the Greek word. The word 'para' means 'beside' and 'noos' means 'mind'. The term means 'beyond knowledge'. So the word paranoia combines both chaos and meaninglessness.

This chapter examines the postmodern theme of paranoia and its effects on individuals in Yann Martel's short story collection *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories*. Cary Fagan says, "Yann Martel's first collection of stories is notable on the one hand for its warm human voice and on the other for a precocious pleasure in experimenting" (22). Martel has employed paranoia as the major postmodern theme in his short story collection. The stories are centred on the theme of identity crisis of the protagonists which leads them to self-destruction and mental delirium which is known as

paranoia, a type of schizophrenia. The trauma and the psychological problems that lead the characters to paranoia are brilliantly caricatured by Yann Martel in this short story collection.

The first story *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* is centered on Paul's struggle between the physical and spiritual world. Paul is undergoing treatment to survive AIDS and who needs to be taken care of. The story is narrated from the point of view of the unnamed narrator, who has been in the hospital with Paul longer than anyone else. Paul's paranoia is evident from his reaction towards his sufferings due to AIDS. Apart from the obvious impact on mental health, there are several ways in which AIDS and psychiatric disorders are linked. His course of illness has been influenced by emotional factors like persistent sadness, anxiety, feeling empty, helplessness, intensity of survivor guilt, negativity, emergence of hostility, loss of appetite and disinterest in engaging with others. "Meals left unfinished. A complaint once of diarrhoea. A lack of energy that went beyond phlegmatic temperament ... And he seemed to be losing weight" (FHR 4). Having a serious illness of AIDS is a major source of stress. Susan Sontag's novel *The Way We Live Now* (1980) is a fictional narrative about AIDS where name of the disease and its victim is not revealed.

By and large, the stories about AIDS that have followed Sontag's have also kept their distance from the subject As good as these stories are – and some are excellent – most of them are not stories about people with AIDS – instead, they are stories about people who know other people with AIDS. Once again, the disease and those who suffer from it are kept at a distance. (Warner 493)

Living with AIDS complicates the existing mental health conditions of the victim which leads to change in his behavior. Paul's course of illness has been influenced by emotional factors. He contracted AIDS during a blood transfusion during an accident. He is affected with symptoms of sadness, insomnia, poor appetite and weight loss. He is constantly troubled about his imminent death. "Why is so much about death in bad taste?" (FHR 92). The story is a literal depiction of a man who is aware of encountering death shortly. The entire novella takes place in the shadow of death. The story starts with Paul's death. "Nine months later he was dead" (FHR 5). This death is the impetus of the protagonist's never ending quest for the meaning of life. He says, "Death is our destiny and destruction our greatest talent ... LONG LIVE DEATH! DEATH TO INTELLIGENCE!" (FHR 74).

Paul has been undergoing treatment as an AIDS patient in the hospital. His view about the world is dominated by his fear of death. His fear of death is the result of paranoia. He has side effects such as fever and rashes all over his neck and chest. He becomes thin, he hardly eats and his diarrhea is persistent. He has a tube up his nose. He has purple, blue lesions on his feet and ankles. He undergoes radiation therapy. Yet week by week Paul is getting thinner and weaker. AIDS makes him look like an old man. "He was still weak and out of breath. He moved about like an old man, slowly and conscious of every exertion" (FHR 10). No one can imagine what AIDS will do to a body. The virus does not die but it kills the living. "The worst of it is the resistance put up, I'm-not-going-to-die virus. It's the one that affects the most people because it attacks the living, the ones who surround and love and dying. That virus infected me early on" (FHR 11-12).

Paul's mood is often changing. Initially his pills and injections are a source of delight. His health eludes him and he is angry of losing his vitality. He takes the medicines expecting cure but it tastes bitter as hope eludes him. He is receiving treatments but he doesn't seem to have any improvement. The doctor says, "Let's see ...breathlessness, cough, weight loss, fatigue. Paul, you have pneumonia" (FHR 5). Paul receives blood transfusions regularly. In the meantime he is kept under close surveillance, especially at night. Paul has received another blood transfusion. He experiences a moment of strength after every blood transfusion but is evident that his immune system is getting weaker. Though he is not feeling hungry he eats his whole supper. He chews every mouthful before swallowing. He says, "It will help my body fight. Every little bit counts" (FHR 12). Evoking memories of the happy past rejuvenates Paul who is sick. Paul feels happy when he sees his collection of family photographs.

Paul feels hopeless and has no future to look forward to. Tests gave bad result, showing lack of oxygen in the blood. His lungs are weak and his breathing is quick and shallow. His ailment results in psychiatric disorders as a consequence of the infection. His health condition starts worsening consistently. "An autopsy had revealed that the man had severe toxoplasmic cerebral lesions" (FHR 6). Paul no longer sustains the effort of concentration. He becomes the critical spectator of his imagination. His urinary tract is infected and he is affected with internal bleeding. For people who are terminally sick, illusion can be psychologically therapeutic. The narrator becomes familiar with chemical composition of the medicines he is administered, such as azidothymidine, alpha interferon, amitriptyline, domipramine, nitrazepam, dapson and trimethoprim. The treatment for

AIDS has no effect and Paul's condition deteriorates and he becomes blind. "He's bundled up in a wool cap, a scarf, a sweater, gloves and a blanket. Death has a smell. It permeates the house" (FHR 92).

Paul is found powerless, depressed, and isolated which are the characteristics of paranoia. "His parents secretly loathe these magazines because they make them feel powerless" (FHR 54). It also increases the rates of disappointment, stress and hopeless state of mind. "Paul is plainly waiting for me. He's bored. Strange how this illness, which aims to rob him of time, leaves him with so much of it on his hands" (FHR 47). "He can't stop looking about, in a constant state of marvel at Nature around us. His feelings are intense and radiant" (FHR 52). Paul's lips and nostrils were slightly blue because of the lack of oxygen in the blood. He was administered morphine to overcome pain and his pulse was fluctuating.

All the characters in this story face mental health challenges at some point. Major stress like the death of a loved one has major impact on the family member's mental health. Paul's family was broken completely with pain and grief. They were not able to accept that their teenage son was affected with AIDS. "But death couldn't make itself understood... Death was beyond him... He spoke of his condition as if it were news from a foreign country. He said, "I'm going to die," the way he might say, "There was a ferry disaster in Bangladesh" (FHR 9).

Paul's condition makes his family to be isolated from the society. Paul's father Jack is a hardworking corporate lawyer. Paul was administered blood transfusion after an accident. The blood transfusion resulted in acquiring AIDS virus. It all happened so quickly and so unexpectedly. But Paul's father couldn't accept reality at that time and even afterwards.

His father destroyed the family car by setting it on fire. His neighbours rushed to the scene and police too arrived. But all were understanding and even the police left without charging him. He destroys things like table or an appliance and whatever comes to his hands. Paul's father hasn't gone to work. Breaking things as a means of pent up anger is a symptom of paranoia.

Early the next morning he fetched the tool kit in the basement, put his winter parka over his housecoat, stepped out onto the driveway, and proceeded to destroy the family car. Because he had been the driver when they had had the accident in Jamaica, even though it hadn't been his fault and it had been in another car, a rental. He took a hammer and shattered all the lights and windows. He scraped and trashed the entire body. He banged nails into the tires. He siphoned the gasoline from the tank, poured it over and inside the car, and set it on fire. (FHR 7)

Paul's mother Mary is a smart, energetic woman who had earned an M.A. in Anthropology from McGill University. She is an amateur tennis player. She works part-time for a human rights organization. After knowing Paul's ill-health, she lies awake on the bed in a fetal position, looking like a wrinkled balloon. She has no hope for the future to look forward. "A child dying before a parent, the future before the past- can there be anything more killing to the spirit? It's the ultimate hopelessness, something worse than death: extinction" (FHR 56). Paul's sister Jennifer is a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her eyes were red, her face was puffy and she looked terrible. She hasn't gone to school. She cried continuously in her bedroom. She avoids taking even a small risk of ordinary life out of fear. "She doesn't use the hairdryer in the bathroom

anymore for fear of water and electrocution. She doesn't ride her bicycle any more for fear of gaping sewer grates and swinging car doors" (FHR 57). Even George H., the family Labrador, is in grief. Now he squeezes himself under the living-room sofa. For more than three days he didn't eat anything. "The verdict had come on Wednesday morning, and since then (it was Friday) none of them, George H. included, had eaten a morsel of food. Paul's father and mother hadn't gone to work, and Jennifer hadn't gone to school. They slept, when they slept, wherever they happened to be" (FHR 8).

Family member's everyday concerns felt minor and trivial when compared to Paul's anxieties. They rally around Paul in the hospital. They talk, sob and encourage each other by laughing and whispering. They try to show normal behavior as if death didn't exist. Everyday becomes both heroic and ordinary day for them. They seem to be composed and somewhat numb in their face to please Paul. Paul is the centre of the house upon whom the whole family is revolving around.

The house is like a solar system, with Paul as the sun, the centre of it all.

In every important room in the house there is an intercom that is linked to all the other intercoms. The system is on all the time. Every rustle, every cough, every word that the Sun King produces is heard throughout his domain. (FHR 53)

Seeing Paul suffering, the narrator also gets depressed. He is not able to control his emotions while seeing Paul mouthful when he is not hungry.

It was written all over his face, all over his body, all over the walls. I wanted to scream, "Forget the fucking peas, Paul. You're going to die! DIE!" Except that the words "death" and "dying", and their various derivatives and

synonyms, were now tacitly forbidden from our talk. So I just sat there, my face emptied of any expression, anger roiling me up inside. (FHR 12)

The narrator is so weak and his expression of emotion is an output of his underlying affective state. The word AIDS itself has medical, psychiatric and psychoanalytical history. Depression is the commonest psychiatric syndrome among AIDS victims. Symptoms of depression affect Paul's day to day life which makes him distressed emotionally. Emotional distress is also called mental anguish. Such emotional distress is temporary but in the case of Paul it is permanent.

The narrator's anxiety regarding Paul's condition affects his personal and social life. He gets angry when his Professor asked to explain a point during his presentation: "I screamed, I got up, I projected the hefty Hegel books through the closed window, and I stormed out of the office, slamming the door as hard as I could and kicking in one of its nicely sculptured panels for good (FHR 14). The narrator lost his temper, crying and disengaging because his emotional distress is expressed through physical reaction. Anger increases his heart rate, blood pressure and suppresses his sense of reasoning.

The narrator finds a way to treat Paul's problem. The narrator tries to make Paul happy by making him watch a movie or play and by making him to listen to music. They invent story telling as a tool to escape from their agony. Story telling becomes a part of their life. Their stories are constantly changing are often rewritten. They plan the story in such a manner to narrate the life of a fictional character Roccamatio. Story telling is considered as one of the healing arts by the narrator and is beneficial for people like Paul who try to cope with their loss. The narrator's idea of creating a story is a psychological therapy for Paul to recover from his illness. The narrator says, "Yes, to meet as

storytellers to embrace the world-there, that was how Paul and I would destroy void” (FHR 18). He gets an idea from Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* where people fled the city because of the plague and pass their time by telling stories to each other. He reminds himself that he has to carry out the story by himself. “And I would have to be well prepared so that I could carry the story all by myself when Paul was too weak or depressed ... everything besides the story was useless, even his desperate existential thoughts that did nothing but frighten him. Only the imaginary must count” (FHR 18). What Boccaccio had done in the fourteenth century, the narrator and Paul plan to do it in the twentieth century.

The narrator’s idea of telling stories taken from Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* can be considered as a technique of pastiche in this short story. Pastiche is an imitation of an original work of another writer.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (Jameson 7)

Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* is a collection of stories told when the city is afflicted by the plague from which there is no escape. Story telling helps those who are in pain to escape into an imaginary world. Narration of stories transports them from the wretched reality to another world of dreams. Paul’s life becomes a monotony of tests and treatments. So Paul and the narrator decide to tell each other story. They are not talking about the

present world because they prefer to delve in the past to forget the present pain caused by the disease AIDS contracted by Paul. At the same time they follow the structural pattern they had designed for their stories. They insist upon the importance of a structure to build a story.

If our story was to have any stamina, any breadth and depth, if it was to avoid both literal reality and irrelevant fantasy, it would need a structure, a guideline of sorts, some curb along which we blind could tap our white canes. I racked my brains trying to find just such a structure. We needed something firm yet loose, that would both restrict us and inspire us. (FHR 19)

Storytelling or story creation destroys the emptiness or vacuum created by the awareness of imminent death. The narrator and Paul create a story about Roccamatio family of Helsinki. The narrator ensures Paul that everything besides the story is useless and asserts their imagination to be reality. “Martel shows how free and yet connected to our history we are when we create and what creative treasures the dying man is leaving behind as he relinquishes his power of story-telling” (A.C 21). Their story telling is not just a game, it is an intellectual activity. He needs a structure to avoid irrelevant fantasy. They use history of the twentieth century; they plan to start the story from 1901 and progress up to 1986. They plan to narrate the story in eighty-six episodes, each episode highlighting one prominent event of that particular year.

The narrator asks Paul to construct a joint novel about a Canadian family whose activities should mirror the events of the 20th century. Paul likes the idea, but wants to make it more interesting. So they invent the fictional story of Helsinki, A Finnish-Italian

family named Roccamatios and plan to write 100 chapters, each linked to an event of the 20th century history thematically. Each episode resembles one event from a consecutive year of the twentieth century. The narrator decides to select historical events and fictional narrative for the odd years, Paul has the even years and they alternate in composing the story.

We discussed what we knew about Helsinki and agreed on the following: one, it had a population of one million inhabitants; two, it was the capital of Finland in every way- political, commercial, industrial, cultural, etc.: three, it was an important port; four, it had a small but fractious Swedish-speaking minority; and five, Russia always weighed heavily on the mood of the nation. Finally, we agreed that the Roccamatios would be a secret between the two of us. (FHR 22-23)

There is always a connection between the 20th century history, the Roccamatios story and Paul's condition, for their condition is subtle and always shifting. Martel's focus is not upon the story that the narrator and Paul come up with but the historical facts upon which the story is based. The narrator tells, "The purpose of this story is the Rocammatio family of Helsinki. That's not Paul's family; his last name was Atsee. Nor is it my family" (FHR 15). Martel is able to maintain the emotional foundation that forms the basis for any good story. "But a story must also stimulate the mind if it does not want to fade from memory" (FHR IX). The narrator balances both the historical facts and the clinical details of Paul's illness. The intellectual calibre of the narrator elevates the story to greater heights though the subject he deals with is pathetic.

The second story entitled *The Time I Heard the Private Donald J. Rankin String Concerto with One Discordant Violin*, by the American Composer John Morton is about a janitor whose musical compositions express his experience as a soldier in Vietnam during Second World War which transformed him into a music composer. “Combat turned him into a composer” (FHR 149). Morton took music lesson in Secondary School. Music has been used as a healing therapy. John Morton overcomes psychological trauma through music in this story. Music plays a vital role as it helps him to cope with psychological trauma. In the orchestra he always plays the discordant violin. “However, despite the abundance of positive example of the value of the arts in trauma recovery, music and arts receives little recognition by leaders in global health issues” (Clift 2).

Trauma refers to both physical and psychological condition. The psychological trauma is more difficult to be cured. The current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, defines “Post-traumatic stress disorder as “actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence,” whether personally experience or witnessed, or experienced vicariously” (Weathers 107). As described by Sutton, the three aspects of understanding trauma are: “Shock, wound and a lasting effect” (22). He is traumatized by war and violence worldwide. He is affected with Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition which gets stimulated by witnessing psychologically traumatic event such as war. Some common symptoms of PTSD are severe anxiety, flashbacks, uncontrollable thoughts and nightmares. The emotional symptoms of PTSD are hopelessness, agony, guilty conscious, feeling empty, loss of interest, feeling emotionally insensitive. War trauma includes “Shell shock, combat exhaustion and combat stress” (Binneveld 71). According to Herman “Combat stress is

common among soldiers and can develop into PTSD syndrome. Soldiers who suffer from combat induced PTSD report feelings of loneliness and isolation from society, being left helpless and deprived of strength and power of control” (123).

Morton works as a janitor in a small bank for over eleven years. He recounts his youthful days where he was happy with his music. “DANCE WAS JUST ENTERTAINMENT. HE SAID DANCE WAS A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE. I LIKE THAT- A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE. YOU KNOW WHERE I WAS HAPPIEST WITH MY MUSIC?” (FHR 146). When he was nineteen year old he participated in the Vietnam War. In October 1967, a military operation named Khe Sanh started in which adversary armed forces siege a town cutting off fundamental supplies with the point of convincing the enemies to surrender.

IT WAS A SIEGE. ALL THOSE GREAT MODERN WEAPONS, BUT IT WAS LIKE THE MIDDLE AGES. WE WERE SURROUNDED SOLID BY THE NVA.... THING LASTED SEVENTY-SEVEN DAYS. SEVENTY SEVEN DAYS SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE WHO EVERY DAY SHOT AT YOU AND LAUNCHED ROCKET AND MORTAR ATTACKS ON YOU. IT WAS HELL. WE BUILT A MAZE OF TRENCHES AND LIVED IN THEM LIKE WET RATS. THAT’S WHERE I MET DON RANKIN. (FHR 146-47)

The battle of Khe Sanh happened in South Vietnam. Amidst the fight a monstrous airborne assault was propelled by the U.S Air Force. More than 1,00,000 tons of bombs were dropped until mid- April via flying machine. Mortar rounds, cannons shells, and 122 mm rockets fell haphazardly, yet unendingly upon the base. The American Commander

in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland reacted for the battle intended to break the attack. Nearly less than 852 North Vietnamese Army soldiers were murdered during the operation and Donald Rankin was one among the victims.

Morton feels a sense of emptiness while recounting his war experience. He tells that his life from the moment when he became a soldier has been an exercise in futility. They enjoyed music amidst war. He tells “My life since then has been a waste of time” (FHR 150). He wasted his life as a youth being part of the war, the only worthwhile thing he accomplished was the delightful music that he composed. “I couldn’t get through to him. I would take all the alcohol, loveliness and wasted time in the world in exchange for creating something so beautiful” (FHR 151).

During the battle Morton used to compose melodies that he heard over the radio. He used to compose verses of his own. He thanked God for bestowing him with musical talent. He composed melodies with his own verses and sent it to his family to convey that he is alive. Despite the fact that they could not read music, they treated it like a momento.

THANK GOD I HAD THAT VIOLIN. SO I USED TO WRITE DOWN THESE SONGS WITH MY OWN LYRICS AND SEND THEM TO MY PARENTS TO TELL THEM THAT I WAS ALIVE AND ALL RIGHT. THEY CAN’T READ MUSIC, BUT THEY’D READ THE LYRICS LIKE THEY WERE LETTERS. WHOLE THING WAS KIND OF DUMB, I SUPPOSE, BUT THAT’S WHAT I DID. THEN I GOT TIRED OF BUSTING MY HEAD LISTENING TO A RADIO TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THE KEY AND THE NOTES. I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING- HOW CAN I PUT IT? (FHR 148-49)

The stressful situation of the war transformed Morton into a composer. Morton, the discordant violinist expresses his loneliness, emptiness, and suffering through his music. Morton even after becoming an oldman hates facing people. He selects the job of a janitor and works in the offices during mid night as he prefers avoiding contact with people. This is because of his mental illness which is considered to be a kind of paranoia which is the result of the war.

The Rankin concerto which the narrator was listening to was inadequately played. Morton ceaselessly commits errors yet his performance is appreciable. Human being is a mixture of both flaws and perfectness. Morton's music is a blend of ideal brilliance and at the same time it is therapeutic for the narrator as the music is the outcome of his innermost sufferings. "There was no robotic flawlessness here. Like Punk rock, like Jackson Kerouac, it was truly human, a mix of perfect beauty and cathartic error" (FHR 129).

Martel discusses the sense of reality throughout the story. People are focused on acquiring materialistic wealth hoping for a better future, but it leads to identity loss, alienation and frustration. The narrator is going to Washington, Region of Columbia to visit his old secondary school friend. His friend works in an accounting firm of Price Waterhouse, a multinational Company in Washington DC. He is occupied with his work always. He used to bring heaps of records home and worked till two in the morning. In spite of the fact that he is earning a good salary, he is not happy with it. His brain is continually pondering over the following move in Texas Price Waterhouse. He is not able to find time for his friend. "But the point is, he was busy at the work during the day, and the weather was sunny and mild" (FHR 103). " But Price Waterhouse was about to close a deal with Texas Air's unions, and the City of New York had responded earlier than expected to a

PW proposal to do work at JFK and LaGuardia airports. He was busy” (FHR 107). Even when the narrator returns home after the concerto around two thirty, he sees his friend was looking after heaps of file. He was in a far reaching state of mind thinking about Texas Price Waterhouse. His workplace was loaded with reports, and notes. “It was late, close to two-thirty, when I got home. My friend was still up. He was in an expansive mood. His evening had been productive; his desk was a mess of reports read and notes written” (FHR 156).

The narrator wanders the city alone as he experiences a feeling of emptiness. He feels the concert to be a sign of life while roaming the city. “The Merridew was no more, it seemed. But to the right of the door was a small display case with a paper inside. A sign of life? I got closer” (FHR 105). The advertisement is stuck in the barbershop where he reads the name of the dissolving theatre on the window. The missing letters reflect the position of the theatre which is in the worst condition of destruction like the narrator’s mind. “Some of the letters were scratched out, with only their outline left. It was more like **MERI EW TEAR**” (FHR 105).

The Maryland Vietnam War Veteran performed a concert at the Merridew Theatre where John Morton played concert on Donald K. Rankin. Concerto is a melodic organization for a performance instrument joined by an ensemble. It is performed on a stage in a theatre. John Morton expresses his thoughts and feelings about Donald J. Rankin in this concert. The Rankin concerto did not keep going long, it was just ten minutes. Those ten minutes made the narrator feel elated and the pessimistic feeling that life is a waste and torment cleared away.

The narrator's nihilistic attitude is a result of the postmodern age. Nihilism gets its name from the Latin word 'nihil', amounting to nothing. It is associated with outrageous cynicism and a radical suspicion. The German logician Nietzsche is related with skepticism. The narrator's skeptical approach is obvious when he says that he is not intrigued in listening to Vietnam War. The narrator says, "It was the idea of a spectacle, of a *happening*, that attracted me to this concert at the Merridew Theater, not an evening of classical music" (FHR 106).

Special concert at the Merridew Theater

The Maryland Vietnam War Veterans'

Baroque Chamber Ensemble

Plays

Albinoni

Bach

Telemann

And the world premiere of

The Private Donald J. Rankin String Concerto

With One Discordant Violin, by John Morton. (FHR 105)

The atmosphere of the theatre is very important to note. It is symbolic of the war. The chairs of the theatre are totally broken, not even a single fixed seat is to be seen in the house. At least they find perfect spots for organizing seats for the concert. Once the music started the auditorium became peaceful. "It was as if the house were an empty lung that was suddenly filling with fresh air. An immaterial something-meandering and sliding

and oh so beguiling- had surrounded us, taking over the entire space, right down to the last crack and crevice” (FHR 115). The power of music can heal the broken heart. These broken chairs resemble the broken lives of the soldiers who were employed in the Vietnam War. Once the concert starts the theatre seems not a demolished place anymore, it seemed to be a grand sanctuary. The rhythm of music fluctuates, and the music is strange as well as wonderful. Silence prevails everywhere. The musicians forget their past pain and anxiety about their future. The narrator’s psyche is completely involved in the satisfying music and his mood becomes amicable.

What a strange, wondrous thing, music. At last the chattering mind is silenced. No past to regret, no future to worry about, no more frantic knitting of words and thoughts. Only a beautiful, soaring nonsense. Sound- made pleasing and intelligible through melody, rhythm, harmony and counterpoint-becomes our thinking. The grunting of language and the drudgery of semiotics is left behind. Music is a bird’s answer to the noise and heaviness of words. It puts the mind in a state of exhilarating speechlessness. (FHR 116)

The music is hypnotizing, applauding and shrieking. The discordant violin played by Morton gives genuine quality to its magnificence. “If music were colour, the theatre would have become a kaleidoscope of colours ... if music were colour I were a chameleon, I would have changed colours forever” (FHR 126). After the interlude the narrator sees the genuine expression on every one’s face. Morton began his violin with creative energy. Despite the fact that the narrator does not know anything about music, he could instinctively feel the emotion. The narrator felt as if everything vanished and only the stage existed.

“I could describe the music with my deaf eyes. There was nothing to be seen except the stage. The rot and decay of the theatre disappeared. The audience disappeared. Only the stage existed, and on that stage, only John Morton ... The beautiful man was a failure” (FHR 127). The sculptures on the wall of the theatre with mutilated heads, limbs and torsos become magnificent all of a sudden. The charm of music makes psychological trauma endurable.

The narrator was enthralled by the music. He feels, thus: “This was like no music I had ever heard before ... my soul was pulled out of me and thrown up in the air to be tossed about by the music?” (FHR 129). The narrator states that Morton’s music is the loveliest thing he has ever heard in his life. “I’ve heard anything like that discordant violin before. Most beautiful thing I’ve heard in my life” (FHR 142). He encounters an astonishing opportunity of life in the wake of music where everything is under a great change and every established value is under reconsideration.

If sound can convey feeling, then this was it, this was great emotion made aural, this was emotion perfectly translated from the keenly felt to the heard to the keenly felt again. And what I felt at that moment, the emotion with which I was stricken was terrible grief, of a kind throbbing and overwhelming.

For those few seconds, I was thrust into a state of *agony*. (FHR 130)

Music becomes therapeutic for both Morton and the narrator. Music and war are interlinked in this story. Morton’s psychological scars caused during war is expressed through music. “Specific methods and techniques, such as Guided Imagery and Music (GIM), and I improvisation have been used with Vietnam Veterans” (Blake 125).

Martel's short story *Manners of Dying* published in 1993 was made into a film of a similar name in 2004. The short story is epistolary in structure. The story is a compilation of a series of letters written by the prison's warden, Harry Parlington informing a mother about the manner in which her son Kevin's death sentence was executed. Death is the central theme of this story. The story revolves around the convicted man whose death sentence is about to be executed. The warden tells the dead man's mother the last moments of her son's life. The letters depict diverse variants of similar occasions. The prisoner's name is Kevin. Varieties of this letter are laid out as manner of dying and the letters are numbered as 18, 213, 319, 534, 541, 760, 985, 991, 1096. It is not revealed till the end of the story that which one of the letters is mailed or which relates real events.

The word epistolary is taken from the Greek word 'epistle' which means 'a letter'. The technique of epistolary method adds authenticity to the story since it imitates real life. The epistolary structure of the short story provides the capacity to expound the feeling of the warden regarding the demise of the convicted young man. In order to pacify his conscience and to overcome his guilt, the warden is composing a letter. Anne Bower says, "The way in which for the author the epistolary genre provides an amalgamation and thereby a resolution to problems in all the major literary traditions that attract him" (47). The warden's troubled and tormented conscience is cleared by conveying the manner in which the prisoner was hanged. The warden feels that he is not equipped for executing death sentence. The trauma of witnessing the prisoner's death makes him psychologically upset so he writes a letter to the prisoner's mother thus creating a chance to share his emotions. The warden writes:

Dear Mrs. Barlow,

As warden of Cantos Correctional Institution and pursuant to the Freedom-of-Information Act, I am writing to inform you of how your son Kevin Barlow faced up to his execution by hanging for the crimes for which he was convicted.

For his last supper, Kevin ordered: vegetable soup with crackers; turkey (white meat only) with gravy; peas, carrots and potatoes; a salad with a Caesar dressing; red wine; cheesecake. He did not touch any of it.

.....
.....

At 7:01 a.m., the trap was released and your son Kevin Barlow died painlessly;

Please believe that I share in your grief.

Yours truly,

Harry Parlington

Warden,

Cantos Correctional Institution

HP:ym. (FHR 163-66)

Kevin’s execution has been done according to regulations of the court. Harry Parlington, the director of the Cantos execution office, plans to ensure that the procedure is followed in accordance with the rules. “I read him the judgment ordering his execution

as handed down by the legal and legitimate courts of the land in accordance with the law, informed him that I was here to carry out this sentence, and asked him if he understood this” (FHR 164).

This story is about the relationship between Kevin the convict and Parlinton the warden and also about Parlinton’s psychological condition. Parlinton is suffering from paranoia as he is continuously executing death sentences. Parlinton feels guilty for he becomes responsible for annihilating young lives. This is evident when Kevin, the condemned man makes his final request to the prison director on the final day of death. He asks, “Kevin if he had any last words or any last message he wished to have transmitted. Short of breath, he said: “Tell my mother I love her.”” (FHR 165). The death wish of the convicts makes Parlinton to plunge into a labyrinth of guilt and pain. Each time the warden asks whether he has any last words to convey, the reply given by the prisoner varies. “After the minute, I asked Kevin if he had any last words or any last message he wished to have transmitted. He did not seem to hear me” (FHR 173). “After the minute, I asked Kevin if he had any last words or any last message he wished to have transmitted. Short of breath, he said: ‘Knockout. First round’” (FHR 191). Nothing is revealed of his crime, his reaction towards death is only mentioned. Kevin on the other hand is pale and frightened. Parlinton says, “I would describe your son as: pale and agitated” (FHR 190).

The convicts’ final hours are told in flashback as the warden writes a letter to the prisoner’s mother several times, each time beginning with the condemned man’s last meal. “For his last supper, Kevin ordered: boiled potatoes” (FHR 167) “For his last supper, Kevin ordered: half an avocado with a Thousand Island dressing; Salmon with a lemon-butter sauce” (FHR 170) “ For his last supper, Kevin ordered: a salad with a blue

cheese dressing” (FHR 179). The manner of facing death is explained differently in the various letters written. Parlinton’s mental agitation is proved when he assures the convict’s mother about the spiritual guidance provided to her son before anhilating his life. Father Preston provided spiritual guidance, Doctor Lowe provided pill to relieve the tension, the tie-down crew, all veterans of many executions worked swiftly and efficiently.

Doctor Lowe assured Kevin that the execution would be painless, which it is. Kevin grabbed hold of the doctor’s arm and asked him in a quavering voice how he knew this. Doctor Lowe explained that, in hanging, death is brought on not by strangulation but by the snapping of the neck, which is quick and leads to an instant loss of consciousness, so there is no time for pain. Doctor Lowe firmly assured Kevin that he would feel no physical pain. (FHR 165)

Writing is used as a therapy to overcome paranoia. “Writing is a form of therapy. Sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, melancholia, the panic and fear which is inherent in a human situation” (Greene 9). Parlinton sees death in close quarter. He tries to satisfy the last wish of the prisoner. He guarantees him that he will pass on the message to his mother. Parlinton has to execute the death sentence. He has to witness the execution and confirm the death of the prisoner. Parlinton tries to be indifferent to the death he had witnessed but he becomes psychologically affected. He writes a letter to relieve himself of the psychological stress.

Stress is a non-specific organic response to situations that are stressful to the organisms. Its presence in a moderated form signifies a normal adaptation to day-to-day demands. When it is excessive, it is a manifestation of

psychological distress with physical and emotional reactions, and the symptoms vary depending on the phase in which it is found. (Selye 37)

Parlington is uncertain of the convict, Kevin's last wish. He is also uncertain whether he should consider it or not and it adds to his tension and stress. "When I arrived at his cell, he asked me if he could go outside. In matters like this, I have some discretionary power" (FHR 189). Parlington feels sympathetic and narrates the final day of the young man Kevin. In each letter written by the warden, the convicts' choice of final meal, his attitude, his readiness to face death is different. Parlington takes control of his emotions in order to compose the letter to Mrs. Barlow the convict's mother. Parlington resembles a composer, continuously rewriting the letter since he is unable to convey his emotion in the right sense. In all the letters Father Preston offers spiritual salvation to the convict. Parlington feels guilty for being associated with a young man's death.

In one letter Kevin demands backgammon to be played. Parlington accepts the request though it is not allowed as per the rules.

When I arrived at his cell, he asked me if I wanted to play backgammon. I don't particularly like games, but I agreed. I sent a guard to get a game. Kevin and I spent the whole night playing backgammon. We also talked, he to me for the most part. I asked him if he wanted to have our conversation taped, as a final gift to you. He agreed. A tape recorder was brought into the cell. I enclose the four tapes with this letter. Kevin beat me handily at backgammon. (FHR 193)

Martel used the story telling technique to explore the psyche of Parlington. Martel is playing with reality and perception in this story. Behind the backdrop of a convict's

execution in the prison, the prison warden's dislike towards the job is portrayed in his letters. Parlinton is writing various letters to reveal his emotions and perceptions regarding death and the truth that he is unable to convey. Writing has been used as a therapeutic tool to avoid distress or mental illness. Parlinton suffers from a kind of paranoia which is the outcome of witnessing death.

Final story in the short story collections *The Vita AEterna Mirror Company: Mirrors to Last till Kingdom Come*, is a mixture of prose and poetry. The story is told by the unnamed narrator about his grandmother's married life. The story gives the comprehension of the grandmother's long widowhood. The facts are stored in a marvellous machine that mirrors her memories. The story mixes both facts and fantasy. It is a magical mirror machine powered by verbalized memories. The grandmother's experience of loss such as a loved one's death creates major impact in her life. She translated memories into a more concrete manner which has been given in a written form. The pain she undergoes after the loss of her beloved husband is traumatic. The past memories are given in bold letters. Grandmother states her memories of her beloved husband thus:

**I loved that
 Man with all my being.
 I was happy with him
 for twenty-two years. For
 twenty-two years it was a
 pleasure to go to bed at
 night, it was a pleasure to**

**wake up in the morning, it
 was a pleasure to go about
 my day. And then, then, this
 unimaginable ending?
 How did I survive?
 I didn't. A part of me
 died that day that has
 never come back to life. (FHR 233)**

Grandmother is in her early eighties, though she dresses well and keeps herself happy she feels empty and numb within. “She is a woman in her early eighties. Vain in a dignified way, she dresses well” (FHR 210). The grandmother lost her husband shortly after the Second World War, leaving her alone to raise four children. He was a doctor and would often treat his patients free of costs. Sometimes he would buy the pills he prescribes for them. The narrator’s grandfather died of pancreatic cancer at a young age. Grandmother’s memory always lingers upon her husband.

He was a kind and considerate man, a devoted husband, a good father, an excellent doctor, a man of wit and culture, a lover of nature; he was wise, thoughtful, generous, sensible, decent, rational, discreet, judicious, level-headed, sober, modest, steady, virtuous; he was totally exempt from the common sins of envy, laziness, mendacity, fondness for the bottle, lechery, tardiness; he was never known to be evil-tempered, pompous, capricious, rude; and he was the possessor of magical blue eyes-

they were a beacon of his goodness- of which mine were only washed-out, watered-down imitations. (FHR 219)

Grandmother suffered from depression after her husband's death. Grief is a normal response to any loss, but this particular loss of a loved one is irreparable. Persistent grief is a major source of stress which leads later to problems such as depression, chronic stress and loneliness. She suffers personal loss, poverty and faces tough time. The traumatic events intensify her sadness, sleeplessness, anxiety and delusions.

As a young wife she lived through the Great Depression, and shortly after the war her husband died, leaving her alone to raise four children. She suffered through loss, loneliness, poverty, and tough times. By dint of hard work, multiple jobs, careful investments and frugality, she managed to raise her children – with great success... But she can't forget the price of every success along her difficult road. (FHR 206)

Grandmother is not outspoken by nature, but loneliness in old age makes her to talk continuously. Her loneliness makes her to save all the conversation when nobody is there to listen. So when she has opportunity to have someone to listen, she talks continuously without checking if the visitor listens. It is evident when her grandson recounts her memories as “blah blah blah” on the left side of the page, giving his bored reaction simultaneously.

His example was a

blah-blah-blah-blah-

This woman.

blah-blah-blah-blah-

blah-blah-blah-blah-

Soft, white, wrinkled face.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| blah-blah-blah-blah- | Green eyes but red this |
| blah-blah-blah-blah- | moment. An exasperatingly |
| blah-blah-blah-blah- | familiar face I have |
| blah-blah-blah-blah- | known since I can |
| blah-blah-blah-blah- | remember. (FHR 225 - 26) |

Her choice of words are well constructed and neatly presented. Her way of perceiving the world is based on her past experience. “To her, the world is a place run by God where goodness and hard work are ultimately rewarded and evil and sloth are ultimately punished” (FHR 210).

Grandmother’s house is a symbol of loneliness and solitude. His grandmother throws away nothing. She considers everything to be valuable. “She owns no complete set of dishware or kitchenware or bed sheets or towels, only the surviving veterans of six decades of housekeeping” (FHR 211). Each object in her house tells untold story of her character. It will remind memories or events of her loved ones. She cherishes the happy moments of the past while seeing all these things. She considers her past happy memories as a treasure. “A late twentieth-century animist, that’s what she was. Every object in her house was infused with an in dwelling psyche that spoke to her of somebody or something from her long life. Her possessions were intermediaries with the deceased eternal” (FHR 238). Grandson’s speech is given in parenthesis. When he is visiting the grandmother he finds out a machine in the basement. “I said it runs on memories. On recollections, souvenirs, stories. The past” (FHR 220).

It is some sort of mechanical device. There are two gradations marked in red, MAX near the top and MIN near the bottom. HIGH-GRADE WHITE SAND ONLY is written on the door and it opens with a click. The other words like HIGH-GRADE LIQUID SILVER ONLY AND HIGH-GRADE OIL ONLY written on the door. It said: “THE VITA AETERNA MIRROR COMPANY, PORT HOPE, ONTARIO, it said. MIRRORS TO LAST TILL KINGDOM COME. (FHR 209)

The mirror comes out while the grandmother recounts her unforgettable days with her husband. Strong feelings and memories are shed through tears. Martel has blended memories with magical realism.

**... I thank
the Lord every day for
His gift. I've had many
men propose to me since
he passed away, but no
one could replace my
sweetheart, no one. Oh
Lord, I have su-su-
Suffered so much!**

She's crying. (FHR 225)

In each story there is a sense of hidden truth. All the characters are significantly more real than the stories they choose to tell. Reviewers have applauded Martel's ability to blend resonant emotional storylines with typical prose forms. All the four stories probe the theme of death. The first story tells destructiveness of AIDS which has been paralleled with the political horrors of the 20th century. Thus AIDS is blended into history. The second story is about a Canadian student whose perspective of life changes after hearing the Concerto which is written by Vietnam veteran John Morton. It is about a union of physical and emotional sensations of music. Thus Martel proves that he has the talent of blending fiction and reality. The third story is about a report of a prison warden writing a letter to a mother about her son's experience before and during the time of his execution. It explores the warden's personal reactions to death. *Manners of Dying* has similar theme as it concerns a dying man. The last story is about the grandmother whose memories come out as a form of mirrors. The mirror is constructed from grandmother's memories of her dead husband. The grandmother's speech constructs a physical object. Grandmother's speech consists of fragments of her memories about her marriage, which she speaks into the funnel of a mirror making machine. Her words are faintly printed on the mirror itself.

Each story in this short story collection, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* portrays a narrator who suffers psychological trauma due to witnessing death at close quarters. All the narrators of the short story collection are spectators of death. They witness the traumatic experience underwent by the victims. Each narrator expresses their pain of seeing their loved one die and cope up with the loss in each story. Linda Morra says, "These stories, to my mind, surpass the novel in literary achievement and experimentation. They reveal his aesthetic inventiveness, his sheer sense of play with the genre, which

demonstrates a remarkable adeptness and richness of mind” (188 - 89). Paranoia in the above mentioned stories provoke a persistent phobia on sufferers which results in identity crisis. To overcome their psychological trauma the characters create an illusion of reality which makes the sufferers to become isolated from society, resulting in paranoia. Martel’s *Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* indeed perfectly exemplifies the suffering of those who try to overcome the loss of someone with whom they were closely associated.