



A Stylistic Study Of Prison Narratives: A Critical Approach

Ahsan Ul Haq Magray¹, Aneesa Farooq²

¹Assistant Professor Department of Higher Education Jammu and Kashmir, India.

²Research Scholar Department of Linguistic University of Kashmir (J and K, India)

APA Citation:

Magray, A.U.H., Farooq, A., (2020). , A Stylistic Study Of Prison Narratives: A Critical Approach , *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 16(2), 1100-1107; 2020.

Submission Date: 10/04/2020

Acceptance Date: 15/05/2020

Abstract: Prison Literature is one of the emerging genres of the world literature. The experience of imprisoning writers is since antiquity. There have been a number of writers who were put behind the bars due to different political, social, and religious reasons. But the confinement has only physically captivated them, their mind and imagination had pierced the high prison walls. There are many writers who were imprisoned in a solitary confinement, denied of reading and writing materials, even they were denied the open sun light, their window panes were smeared with paste, so that no light can enter their cells. But out of these critical conditions have emerged a large body of works and that have established the fact that one can imprison one's body, however not soul, mind and imagination. There present study offers and presents briefly many of the world classical texts produced in prisons/ jails or hose arrest. The paper will try to establish the fact that the power of mind and imagination, which cannot be restrained even in incarceration. It will be helpful in developing the paradigms of prison literature, and how a writer can create beauty, hope etc. amid horrors and traumatic situations of prison environment.

Keywords: Prison Literature, prison narratives, incarceration, aesthetics, hope,

INTRODUCTION

Prison Literature could be defined as a body of literature written by writers in prison, jail, lock-up, prisoner's camp, concentration camp and house arrest for different reasons. The jail does not only mean iron bars and high walls, it also means restrictions on one's physical and mental freedom, dislocation from social, cultural, and political life. There is a huge body of works produced by writers while serving imprisonment across different cultures written in different languages of the world ranging from Arabic, English, Urdu, Persian, French, German, and other major or minor languages of the world. Anouck de Wringer thus aptly defines Prison Literature thus in his paper entitled "I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody: Defying Violence with Words":

Prison literature is a genre in which authors usually express their individual or collective struggle against an oppressive regime. In this way, prison literature could be regarded as a literary testimony of oppression and resistance that can clarify the specific facets of violence within a particular socio-political context. (Wringer 1)

Prison Literature is the narrative that have written, when a writer is imprisoned against his/her will in jail, camp, cell or even house arrest. The world literary giants who were incarcerated by their regimes for different reasons had written prose and poetry in the form of novels, letters, autobiographies, memoirs, poetry etc. Whatever the form of a prison work may be, one common facet that could be located in all is the writer's will to never surrender against the system of detention. More or less, a writer is incarcerated and put in a location against his/her will so that he/she must be restricted from daily routines of life. Moreover, to imprison a writer is to curb his/her freedom, to put a ban on his/her thought process. Joseph Brodsky in an article titled "the writer in prison" published in *The New York Times* argues that:

It's not that prison makes you shed your abstract notions. On the contrary, it pares them down to their most succinct articulations. Prison is, indeed, a translation of your metaphysics, ethics, sense of history and whatnot into the compact terms of your daily deportment. The most effective place for that is of course solitary, with its reduction of the entire human universe to a concrete rectangle permanently lit by the 60-watt luminary of its bulb. Under which you revolve in pursuit of your sanity. After a couple of months of that, the solar system is compromised thoroughly -- unlike, it is to be hoped, your friends and close associates -- and if you are a poet, you may end up with a few decent lyrics under your belt. As pen and paper are seldom available to a prisoner.

However, the history proves the fact, one could only imprison one's body not his mind and imagination. Furthermore, to imprison a writer is to colonize his body, mind, thought, imagination, and soul etc. nonetheless to write is to defeat this design and to subvert it. Regimes who imprisoned the writers have been forgotten long ago, however the writer through written record can never be erased from the history. These liberated souls have inspired many to stand in front of the traumatizing situation and finding a way amid most terrible environment of detention system. For a prison writer senseless or even minute things become a way to make life beautiful and meaningful. The dark and narrow walls of prison could not deter the free will of a writer, on the other hand it has proved a blessing in disguise for many great authors. Writers when imprisoned have found this a paradox of gain by loss as Rivkah Zim—an emeritus professor who has done a great deal to define the Prison Writings has taught. A writer imprisoned whether a prisoner of conscience, a dissident, a political figure, or a religious one, often feels a need to defend his/her integrity and core of commitment for which he/she is incarcerated. Writing by an imprisoned/jailed or house arrested becomes an act of resistance and resilience. Rivkah Zim in the introduction of her book *The Consolation of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethius to Primo Levi*, quotes this comment:

Resistance may sometime enhance chances of survival, but this is seldom sufficient; for personal or political reasons, the persecuted captive may decide one must survive morally or spiritually intact, which is why some prisoners regard suicide as a paradoxical means of self-preservation; similarly, martyrdom. Such prisoners have always used various means to preserve and defend themselves against corrosion of fear, uncertainty and disinformation. Writing is one of the most important and durable of these methods. In captivity, writing is often a continuation of the authors' ordinary vocation, but confinement and repression also prompt dissidents to speak out, either in self-defense or for their cause. Many prisoners wrote personal accounts that interpret their past, recorded present interrogations or suffering, and preserve memorial images of themselves and others as historic testimony. (Zim 1)

Many prison writers have found their time in captivity a time to comprehend on some of the most serious questions of life, and have found it a time to free themselves from the daily mundane of lives. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of the most celebrated Urdu poets has found his four years of incarceration as he himself accepted

this in one of his interviews that ‘going to jail was like falling in love again’. He in one of his famous prison poems writes:

What if my pen and paper have been snatched away?

I have dipped my fingers in the heart's blood,

What if my lips are sealed?

I've lent my tongue to each link in the chain. (Faiz)

There are world renowned intellectuals, thinkers, politicians, and writers who have been captivated from time to time by their governments to stop them from speaking their thoughts out. They were put in solitary confinement, outside communications were totally banned, their window panes were smeared so that even the day light will not enter their cells. They were beaten, tortured, forced to bath in subzero-degree waters, electrocuted, deprived of sleep, high velocity bulbs were used to torture etc. To imprison them is not only to physically cage them, moreover, to traumatize them psychologically. Out of these psychological pressure, emerges a large body of works, which establishes the fact, that one's imagination can never be captivated. Writing for them acted as consolation, a strategy to defeat the system of detention. Many of these prisoners remain well known—Boethuis, Bunyan, Gramsci, Bonhoeffer, Wilde, Faiz, Abul Kalam Azad, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Nelson Mandela, Soyinka, Breytenbach, Ngugi etc. Rivkah Zim, argues in her seminal book *Consolation of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethuis to Primo Levi*, that prison worked as paradox of gain by loss, or in other words blessings in disguise.

Ahmed Fouad Negm, one of the important poets of Egypt was imprisoned eighteen years from time to time by the regimes to silence him. A poor boy, who never went to any school, learnt reading songs and poetry in jail. Colin Penter in his article entitled “The Poetry of Ahmed Fouad Negm (1929-2013)” writes about Negm's poetry in these words:

He started writing poetry in prison in the 1960s. His sympathy was with the poor and downtrodden, and his poetry expressed contempt for the powerful elites who controlled Egypt...Negm had little formal education and worked as a domestic worker and a postal worker. He was jailed for his political views under the rule of presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat. (Penter 01)

His first poetry collection *Images from the Life and Prison* got published by the ministry in 1962 while still incarcerated. Negm asserts that he: “discovered in himself in prison the poet whose name was to be on everyone's lips from the Gulf to the ocean and in any town or village on earth where Arabic is spoken” (Anis 44). There are other poets who were denied from all the necessities to depress them in prison cells, measuring 4 by 6 inches, where they could not even stretch legs, Negm, in one of his poems wrote, establishing the fact that the imagination and mind of the liberated minds can never be captivated:

That prisons are only walls,
The ideas are like light,
That light can jump over a thousand walls,
And that walls never hold back the spirit. (Negm)

There are a number of such examples where an imprisoned writer has tried to defeat the system of detention by protesting their anger and frustration in the form of written record. They have used all the possible means to maintain their integrity, and commitment, no matter what ever the situation they face. A number of great

writers like Ngugi, Soyinka, Breytenbach, Faiz, and others have used the smallest things for writing. Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote his famous novel *Devil on Cross*, on toilet tissue papers, thereby registering his protest. Soyinka too has used the cigarette cover and homemade ink to record his protest, which later was published in the form of *Man Died*. Faiz Ahmed Faiz has written some of his best poetry during his incarceration in different jails of Pakistan. During his initial days, he started composing qit'tas (quatrain), in solitary confinement. The prison poets had used the metaphoric and veiled language to defeat the panoptic eye, where everything is being securitized. Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notes* is one of the most important tracts of Marxism are prison production. He wrote these notes under most traumatizing situation, during his time in prison, where was unable to sleep for few hours, he started thrashing his head against the walls, vomiting blood from his mouth, however out of these situations comes out his *Prison Notebooks*. Furthermore, Yenna Wu, while discussing the issue and topics theorized or highlighted in prison literature, aptly writes:

Critical issues investigated include how the writers represent their sufferings, experiences, and emotions during incarceration; their strategies of survival; and how political prison literature can reveal hidden violations of human rights while resisting official discourse and serving other functions in society. Examining the commonalities and differences in global experiences of imprisonment, the book engages with the aesthetics of self-making and resistance, individual and collective memory, denial and conversion, catharsis and redemption, and the experiencing and witnessing of trauma. Topics also include the politics of remembering and the politics of representation, such as the problematic relationship between narrative, language, and representations of torture. Similarly, under discussion are prison aesthetics of happiness, the role of spectacle in the criminal justice system, and the intersection of prison, and its silences. (Wu vii-viii)

Taking the examples like these, it could be ascertained that the aesthetics of prison literature could not be captivated by any mechanized brutality. For a prison writer, an aesthetics kick can be from smallest things to higher values, Bence Nany Bence Nany's quote firmly fits on the prison aesthetics, as she aptly writes in her book *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction*:

If an experience is worth having for you, it thereby becomes a potential subject of aesthetics. You can get your aesthetic kick where ever you find them. Aesthetics is not a field guide that tells you which experience are allowed and which are not. It is not a map that helps you find them either.

Had not prison poets romanticized their prison cells, chains, as Faiz Ahmed Faiz writes somewhere else; *Tum a rhay ho ki bejti hai merizanjeerai*, (Are you coming 'beloved' or this is the sound of prison chains) at other places he talks to air by personifying, as: "life is so sweet at this moment." Interestingly, in the same vein Barbara Harlow's argument fits here well. She writes:

Prison escape, like Tim Jenkin's key, even as they materially and symbolically challenge the state's apparatus of control and containment, and effectively assist the resistance and its political and military struggle outside, leave the state institution of detention intact. These escapes do serve, however, as blueprints, drafts, for the project of its dismantling. (Harlow, *Barred* 30)

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) wrote *De Profundis* (1905) his 55,000-word letter to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas while serving his prison term in Reading Goal. In the prison, he was allowed to spend some time for reading but not to write, but somehow, he managed to write this long letter.

Our Lady of Flowers (1943) a novel by Jean Genet was first published anonymously, and was later published under the writer's name in 1944. Genet, who wrote it while he was in prison for burglary, was supported by great writers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote the introduction of this novel.

Gubhar-e- Khatir (1946) a collection of letters by Abul Kalam Azad is one of the finest examples of prison Literature written during 1942-46 in Ahmednagar Jail in Maharashtra. Azad defeated the system of detention by writing some of the wonderful letters in world literature and philosophizing many critical issues like, religion, music, philosophy etc. One wonders how all this happen without having any basic necessity to move the life on.

Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963), by Dr Martin Luther King wrote on April 16, 1963, and published on June, 12 same year. In Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963, King's camping end segregation counters drew nationwide attention. For this King was jailed with a large number of school children. From the jail, King wrote a letter of high eloquence in which he expressed his philosophy of non-violence.

Nigerian noble Laureate Wole Soyinka (1934-) was arrested in 1967 for allegedly visiting the secessionist territory Biafra. It was believed that he may not be able to write anything as no books or stationery was allowed inside his cell. Nonetheless, Soyinka started writing on cigarette covers with broken pencil, and kept the notes in crackers. *Man Died* (1971) is a memoir about his prison experience. The work elucidates his arrest, imprisonment and interrogation. He was placed in solitary confinement, so the work exemplifies the mental effects of solitariness in jail. *Madmen and Specialists* is Soyinka's another prison narration. Soyinka spent twenty-two months in prison during the Biafran war from 1967-1970.

Devil on the Cross is one of the finest examples of prison literature written entirely on toilet tissue papers by famous African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi talks elsewhere about its composition in these words:

My cell was the first to be raided; it was difficult to know what they were looking for...suddenly, the sergeant saw piles of toilet papers and pounced on them. Then as if delirious with joy and triumph, he turned to the presiding officer, and announced: 'here is the book, sir, on toilet papers'. Seize it! The officer told him. (Ngugi)

Notes from Prison by Alija Izetbegovic's is a spiritual escape to freedom written during his incarceration. He was politically incarcerated in 1983 by the Communist regime in Yugoslavia for a long period of fourteen years at Foca jail in Sarajevo. Although he served only six-year imprisonment, yet during his stay in confinement, he composed a number of valuable and philosophical notes on a variety of critical issues. *Notes from Prison* is a unique and outstanding example of Prison Literature.

All literature written behind prison walls provides a harrowing account of physical and mental suffering along with heartening insights into human courage, resilience, and a stubborn will to be free. Prison Literature comes to the affirmation of famous dictum that "You can only imprison a man's body, not his mind".

Trauma is one of the critical issues documented in prison literature. Viktor E. Frankl was imprisoned by Nazi's in a concentration camp for three years. His phenomenal book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), explores his experiences as a prisoner and includes the psychotherapeutic method, which involved

identifying purpose in life in the most critical times. This also includes feeling positive about life and then immersive imagining outcome from psychological traumatic zones. Frankl argues; “if there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete” (Frankl 76). Instead of being pushed into silence, their rebelling nature and resistance amplified with every passing day in the confinement. Their voices and cries still resonate despite the lapse of decades and centuries establishing the fact the will to not surrender and magic of aesthetics these prison writers possess. Richard Lovelace (1617-1657) when got imprisoned in 1642 wrote behind the walls:

Stone walls don't a prison make
Nor iron bars a cage,
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for a hermitage. (Lovelace)

Yenna Wu, in her serious engagement while developing the paradigms of Prison Literature validates that, the implicit and explicit motif of Prison Literature seems to be that while incarcerating a writer, the regime/government wants that the physical imprisonment of the writer will break his/her will to resist, and once the mind is colonized, history, language, culture and creativity is occupied/colonized automatically. However, the jailed writer not only writes but also subverts the designs of the regime successfully. Nawal El Saadawi recalls one moment when she was told that “it is easier to give you a pistol than a pen” (Wu Yenna 24). Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) writes in one of his famous poems titled ‘Under Siege’ establishing the fact of aesthetics of, resistance, power, hope etc. of artist’s words:

We do what prisoners do,
And what the hopeless do:
We cultivate hope. (Darwish)

Prison narratives therefore is to protest, rebellion, dissent, and to write is to challenge the system that incarcerated a writer, to defy the mechanism that wants colonize the body, mind and soul of a write, to counter the discourse that is run by the regimes. It is a struggle against oppression and injustice, and a fight for total liberation. As Ngugi maintained in an article titled “Literature in Schools”, the same of which is quoted by Barbra Harlow in *Resistance Literature*, “Literature contains two opposing aesthetics—on one side the aesthetics of oppression and exploitation and acquiescence with imperials, on the other side the aesthetics of human struggle for total liberation” (Harlow 8).

Prison aesthetics also include the politics of remembering, the politics of representation, the politics of torture, of witness and resistance. We also witness in some prison writings the aesthetics of anger and outrage of a rebel whose wings are tied. The aesthetics of happiness and silence is another aspect of Prison Literature. The incarcerated writer is denied of all human rights, in-fact the beauty is being denied to him/her. Then how does he/she create beauty in those dark chambers? And how does an incarcerated mind can think of the world beyond the impregnable fortress-like walls? And how does his soul undergo different transformations? The incarcerated writers have preserved their self-confidence/control/self-assurance/ dignity and transcended the challenges of the prison.

Indeed, writing for an incarcerated writer on the margins of papers, tissues, bags and cigarette covers and other useless objects is a means of survival, a hope amid hopelessness and an escape prison

system, the only possible escape as Alija Izetbegovic had argue in his prison note. Eunice de Souza, comment in his article entitled “Poems on Prison Walls” where she mentions many poets including Nazim Hikmet could serve the purpose well for developing the theoretical part of prison aesthetics:

Taps on the Walls: Poems from the Hanoi Hilton was written by Major General John L Boring. Boring was incarcerated in North Vietnam for six years and eight months. “How did he survive?” asks a commentator, and answers, “By writing poetry.” Without pencil and paper? He memorized the poems the poems, then shared with his fellow prisoners using only the secret tape code. (Souza)

From such an abundance of prison narratives, it could be established that the mind, imagination, soul of a writer can never captivate. History is testimony to the fact, that prison has resulted in the production of the best works ever produced. By saying, the point is not to being a great writer, imprisonment is necessary, nonetheless that imprisonment had resulted in many of the world literary and non-literary classics, and thereby defeating the system of detention.

References:

1. Aboubakr, Randa, “The Political Prisoner as Antihero: The Prison Poetry of Wole Soyinka and Ahmed Fouad Negm,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 46, no. 2 (2009): 261-286.
2. Ashour, Radwa. “Arab Prison Literature.” *Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought*. (2008).
3. Boethius, Anicius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V. E. Watts, (Penguin Books, 1999).
4. Brodsky Joseph “The Writer in Prison,” *New York Times*, Oct 13, 1996, <https://movies2.nytimes.com/books/00/09/17/specials/brodsky-prison.html>.
5. Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Ponder Peacock, 1678.
6. Coppola Carlo, “Another Adolescence: The Prison Poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz.” *Journal of Asian Literature* 27, no. 2, (1992): 149- 174.
- 7.---. *Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. Translated Kiernan, V.G. Oxford India, 1971.
- 8.---. *The Best of Faiz*. Translated by Shiv. K. Kumar, Penguin Random House, 2013.
9. Fee Margery, “Prison Writing/Writing Prison in Canada”. *Canadian Literature A Quarterly of Criticism and Review*, no.208, (Spring 2011).
10. Foucault Michael, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. By Alan Sheridan, (Pantheon Books, 1977).
11. Freeman, Thomas S, “Introduction: The Rise of Prison Literature,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 7, no.2 (2009):133-46.
12. Fyodor, Dostoevsky. *The House of Dead*. Vremya, 1862.
13. Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Lexicon Books. 2014.
14. Gazali. Al- Zainab. *Days from my Life*. Translated by Kidwai R A. 2014
15. Genet, Jean. *Our Lady of Flowers*. Marc Barbez, 1943.
16. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Lawrence & Wishart, 1971.
17. Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. Methuen Inc, 1987.
18. Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kamp*. JAICO, 1935.
19. Izetbegovic, Alija. *Notes from Prison: 1983-1988*. Other Books, 2011.

19. Khatri, Chhote Lal. *Prison Literature: A Global Perspective*. Hauz Khas Enclave New Delhi, 2016.
20. Luther, Martin. *The Letters from Prison*. Penguin Modern, 1963.
21. Larson, Doran. "Towards a Prison Poetics." *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (summer 2010):143-166.
22. Magray A U H. "Incarceration as a Gateway to Wonder in the Poetry of Ahmed Fouad Negm." *Contemporary Literary Review India* 7, no. 4 (Nov. 2020): 1-27.
23. ----. "Reading Faiz Ahmed Faiz." *Greater Kashmir*, July, 16, 2020. <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/opinion/reading-faiz-ahmed-faiz/>.
24. ----. "Prison Poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz: A Study of the Select Prison Poems." *Literary Miscellany* 8, no. (Jan-dec 2019). 1-2.
25. ----. "Faiz Ahmed Faiz: A Study of Resistance, Protest and Voice for Society in his Poetry." *Creative Forum* 34, no. 1-2 (2020).
26. ----. "Exploring Prison Literature." *Greater Kashmir*, 12 Nov 2020, <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/todays-paper/exploring-prison-literature>.
27. Mandala, Nelson. *Conversation with Myself*. Pan Macmillan, 2010.
28. Nehru, Jawaharlal. *Glimpses of World History*. Penguin Books, 1942.
29. Negm, Ahmad Fu'ad. *Suwwarminal-hayatwa'l-sijn*. Prince Claudi. 1964.
30. ---. *Ahmed Fouad Negm Egypt's Revolutionary Poet*. translated by Mohamed F. El-Hewie. Createspace Independent, 2013.
31. Penter, Colin. "The Poetry of Ahmed Fouad Negm (1929-2013)." Sept 25, 2015.
32. Palm, Daniel. "Review of Human Writing suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature." *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 19, no. 1 (April. 2012): 69-70.
33. Rehman, Anisur. "Going to Jail was Like Falling in Love Again' – Faiz Ahmed Faiz." *Herald Magazine*, (2017).
34. Slackman, Michael. "A Poet whose Political Incorrectness is a Crime." *New York Times*, 13 May 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/13/world/africa/13negm.html>
35. Saadawi, Nawal El. *Memoirs from Women's Prison*. Translated by Marilyn Booth. University of California Press, 1994.
36. Schwan, Anne. "Introduction: Reading and Writing in Prison." *Critical Survey* 23, no.3 (May 01.2011): pp.1-5.
37. Souza Eunice de. "Poems on Prison Walls." *Mumbai Mirror*, 02 Feb, 2017. <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/opinion/columnists/eunice-de-souza/the-clock-strikes-thirteen/articleshow/56926616.cms>.
38. Soyinka, Wole. *The Man Died*. Penguin Books, 1975.
39. Thiang'o Ngugi Wa. *Detained: A Writers Prison Dairy*. Heinemann Press, 1981.
40. ----. *Devil on the Cross*. Heinemann. Print, 1982.
42. ---. *The Madmen and Specialist*. University Press PLC, 1971.
43. Wu Yenna and Simona Livesuc. *Human Rights Suffering, and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*. Lexington Books, 2011.
35. Zim, Rivkah. *The Consolation of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethuis to Primo Levi*, Princeton University, 2014.