

## MAPPING THE PRISON: FROM TESTIMONIOS TO THE POPULAR, A CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF INDIAN PRISON LITERATURE AND THE FILM 'MUKTODHARA'

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper looks at the Bengali film Muktohdhara to understand how the prison space has been interspersed with aesthetic qualities. On one hand, it shows the prison space, dark and dreary, on the other it brings into focus the rehabilitation of prison inmates. The main protagonists of the film are Niharika and Mohammad Yousuf. An unhappy housewife, Niharika takes it upon herself to organize a dance drama in the prison, Rabindranath Tagore's Valmiki Pratibha and trains the inmates including Yousuf who plans to escape but eventually finds redemption through the artistic enactment. It also explores the idea of 'natya' or 'drama' as a mode of expression and realization by prison inmates. The paper follows a discursive analytical method to understand the development of prison literature into popular culture.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Prison, Popular Culture, Rehabilitation, Literature, Drama*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Prison literature would most of the time come to mean testimonials or memoirs, written by the incarcerated until recently when it emerged as a new genre, often films and television series. This paper will try and trace the genre of prison discourse in the Indian context through the various modes of artistic expression. In rendering a text into its visual counterpart, a lot of it is a rejection or a variation of the genre. If we look at it diachronically, it deconstructs the pre-existing horizon of expectations and posits a re-understanding of the entire genealogy of work and its reception over time. The kind of debates prison memoirs raised back in the 1980s was a consortium of a particular historical juncture; the story of a subjective individual placed opaquely at a point of crisis and was possibly written and read as a redemptive measure. As we moved into the 2000s, the questions shifted to the legal and political framework of the judicial and an interrogation into the penal code of the country. The moment we drag a text over time, and there is a change in the medium, it answers for the increase of the audience base which otherwise might not have been engaged in the active reading of a text. The visual effectiveness often triumphs over the otherwise political discourse underlying a prison memoir or a testimonial as in this case is seen in 'Muktohdhara,' a 2012 film by Shiboprosad Mukherjee and Nandita Roy.

During the Freedom Movement, prison memoirs represented a rejection of the colonial rule. They addressed the anti-British struggle and were a revolt against the existing state machinery and colonial presuppositions. In one of her articles on 'Problems of Violence, States of Terror: Torture in Colonial India,' Anupama Rao writes, "This paper explores the anxieties about legitimating colonial governance that underwrote the logic of 'discovery' and 'refusal,' and suggests that attempts to contain torture were double-edged. On the one hand, they were significant in the constitution of transhistorical

notions of pain, suffering, and 'the human' that accompanied the moral discourse of the horrific experience of torture. Medical discourses that measured the extent of injury and violation were important for the 'scientific' validation of such claims. On the other hand, the colonial government in Bombay refused to consider the possibility that new demands for proof, motive, and intention in the commission of crime might have, paradoxically, produced a police force that understood torture as 'legitimate' in the production of juridical truth."<sup>1</sup>

Even during the Naxalite movement memoirs like those of Jaya Mitra's 'Hanyaman' and Minakshi Sen's 'Jailer Bhitore Jail' were a critique of state oppression, class, and caste division albeit the subaltern identity and gender hierarchies. During recent years, the idea of incarceration has given rise to an entire genre of literature called the 'Pris Lit', throwing light on a mode of life hitherto unknown to the public eye. These memoirs such as Arun Ferreira's 'Colors of the Cage' or Iftikhar Gilani's 'My Days in Prison' focused on the social dimension and psychological description of the incarcerated self. This emphasis on the self, the incarcerated subject questions the attempted impositions of norms dictated by the legal framework and Indian prison policies. Over the years as a countermeasure, prisons have ceased to be called jails or prison houses but rather Correctional Homes and Rehabilitation Centres. At this intersection lies the importance of films like 'Muktohdhara' which gives us an insight into a new dimension of prison discourse. While political prisoners engaged in the life writing process, there is a continuous shift from reading or writing literature about their own lives to creating arts inside the prison space. The specific use of theatre space in the film as also the offering of various courses in prison facilities is an effort to inculcate the aesthetic and literary function. Ferreira's graphic images drawn during incarceration are also a prime example of the same.

The prison is bizarre and unfamiliar territory for the outsider, and there is a constant need to justify his or her location by an inmate. Over the labelling of 'Protest Literature' there is an urgent requirement for assimilation and to overcome the barrier of distance between the inside and the outside. Apart from political prisoners, there is always a number who are convicts and criminals. However, instead of practicing the politics of exclusion, 'Muktohdhara' opens up newer avenues for the genre of prison writing and bringing to the fore the lived experience of prison life.

The prison is also a protective spatial-temporal setting that is very difficult to understand for those outside the continuum of the lived prison experience. Space and time as a notion of lived reality as well as one which brings about more trauma are interesting in understanding prison bodies. Anita Wilson writes "Prison remains outside the parameters of knowledge of most people and a conventional perception of what it is like, fed by the selective reportage of the media is often at odds with the reality of day to day prison life."<sup>2</sup>

These parameters of prison knowledge depend upon the understanding of space and time in prison houses and its consequent effect on prisoners. While one biological entity may become spiritual over a mode of time, another might go insane, while still another may give birth to a child, although lacking potential conditions for the same. Changes in bodies might be reflected in weight loss and diseases, continual lack of hygiene, ventilation, and sanitation. Structurally, prison houses are meant to coerce the person to the smallest identifiable living entity possible rather than to rehabilitate them and

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<sup>1</sup> Interventions International Journal of Postcolonial Studies. *Problems of Violence, States of Terror: Torture In Colonial India* (Rao, 186-187).

<sup>2</sup> Wilson Anita, *Four Days and Breakfast: Time, Space and Literacy/ies in the Prison Community*. (Wilson, 67)

serve as correction homes. Practices like meeting relatives from within a wire mesh involves cloaking of the apparent reality of a prisoner's life from the outside gaze or knowledge. Ferreira puts it in elementary words, "Indian prison policies are security centric rather than correctional. The state's priority is to tighten restrictions rather than to upgrade facilities for prisoners"<sup>3</sup>. Muktodhara emphasizes on prison facility program which to an extent subverts this very idea of restrictions and allows prisoners a minimal space for the free flow of ideas.

While a text, memoir or a testimonial essentializes the understanding of the prison space and the subjective self, Muktodhara addresses these problems through an artistic standpoint. The live audience forms an integral part of whether a film is accepted or rejected by the mass. In representation, language is not the only medium of communication, but other attributes of histrionics are equally essential and pervading. Elisa Ganser elaborates that "starting from the speculations of Anandavardhana according to which a *rasa* can be communicated only through a suggested capacity attributed to language, Abhinavagupta investigates in the 'Abinavabharati' the process of theatrical communication and the suggestiveness of non-verbal language, recognizing dramatic technique as an independent aesthetic means."<sup>4</sup>

Another feature of prison is that of the distinct separation from human contact, even own family members. Prisons stand for an unknown and foreign life, one which stands for suffering and humiliation. In his article 'The Self and the Cell, Indian Prison Narratives as Life Histories' David Arnold talks of Nehru in these terms, "prison" wrote Nehru of his first term of incarceration in 1921-2 "was still an unknown place, the idea of going there still a novelty(Nehru 1936:79)".<sup>5</sup> Muktodhara breaks this stereotype of the ostracized and harps on the humane quality of the prisoners.

The prison space, the film space, and the theatre space all intermingle within Muktodhara. It talks about the different kinds of bodies which become a part of the incarceration process, and the treatment that is meted out, often dehumanizing. It restores the prisoners' sense of self-recognition and in this case Mohammad Yousuf, the protagonist of the film. Ferreira, in his book, talks about insanity and prisoner's condition as he/she is reduced to a number given by the authorities. In this regard, Bertrand Russell says, "Certified lunatics are shut up because of their proneness to violence. The uncertified variety is given control of powerful armies and can inflict death and disaster upon all sane men within their reach"<sup>6</sup>. The irony and sarcasm against the police force in the Indian system is evident here. The films show us how this could have been true had Yousuf run away with his fellow inmates, an alternative approach to the understanding of prison trauma.

Prison bodies lack the sense of personal space which accounts for the constricted nature of their Ferreira talks about the 'mulaiza' or check-in process which one has to undergo during the entrance as also regular checking by the authorities, which reduces chances of asserting anything, any belonging as ones. The omnipresent gaze also becomes important here, since it withdraws the sense of security and liberty on being constantly scrutinized. The body becomes a property of the prison house with no freedom whatsoever. The concept of prison surfaces an alienation effect to the fore — alienation from the normalcy of life, and all other practices which form the base of livelihood. Regular fights and

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<sup>3</sup> Ferreira Arun. *Colours of the Cage*. Aleph Book Company. 2014. (Ferreira, 118)

<sup>4</sup> Ganser Elisa. *The Spectacular Dimension of Emotion in Indian Theatre*. (Ganser, 63)

<sup>5</sup> Arnold David. *The Self and the Cell*. Indian Prison Narratives. (Arnold,31)

<sup>6</sup> Ferreira Arun. *Colours of the Cage*. Aleph Book Company.

bloodletting as Ferreira says are part of the prison house antics. Survival of the fittest is the strategy among prison inmates, be it a fight for food, space or toiletries, and even water. The idea of shared space and to make something positive out of it as does Alokanda Roy and Niharika in the film in planning dance dramas starring prison inmates. A mix of the textual and theatrical and the later rendition of it in the film allows us to mark the free flowing of ideas, the concept of a greater conscience.

Literary activities become an essential part of the survival process in prison. However, even the act of writing becomes a censored one and writing as an act of self-empowerment and self-evaluation fails to sublimate the prison experience. Paul Gready states in his abstract, “Prisoners are relentlessly rewritten within the official ‘power of writing’ from interrogation and the making of a statement, through legislation and the political trial, to the regulations governing imprisonment.”<sup>7</sup>

In the Indian context, understanding of a dance drama along with its sociological influences is inclusive of the *rasa* theory which forms a veritable part of Bharata’s *Natyasastra*. He describes the four-fold dimension of *Abhinaya-angika* (gestures), words (*vachika*), dresses and makeup (*aharya*) and the representational *sattva*. All these form the *leitmotif* of *Abhinaya* as also in the case of the depiction of the prison dance dramas. Uttara Asha Coorlawala in her ‘Darshan and *Abhinaya*, An Alternative to Male Gaze’ says that “according to Indian theories of aesthetics and perception, looking (*drishti*) as evident in Indian classical dance, is linked with cognizing form (*rupa*) and naming (*nama*). Mastery of *Abhinaya* necessarily involves the ability to direct the audience’s sensibilities towards a particular perception through the use of eye movements”.<sup>8</sup>

The aesthetics of drama lies in its ubiquitous influence on daily modes of existence, its approach to the sphere of ontology, the cosmology of particular and the universal, and performance politics. Isn’t *natya* a part of our lives in a subtle concealed manner? Drama produces a perceptual knowledge unlike any other form of art, it is the knowledge of the imperceptible, the unconscious or the semi-conscious, it belies the textuality of the text as also negates cinematographic representations or the freedoms associated with it, only to ensure that it remains primary to the world spirit that *natya* enfolds within itself. *Natya* is an immaculate concept which is neither imitative nor detached from life. The binary between the two poses questions of relative importance of drama as a source of knowledge. Debates regarding whether the drama is first hand or imitative knowledge has always been at play, the actor-spectator relationship, and as to who is the object of knowledge, queries regarding the subjective nature of knowledge has been posited now and forever. *Natya* grows within us, and outside us, it probes into the psyche of the phenomenal being and posits objective knowledge, which is independent of the realm of the subject. In the prison scenario, it bridges the gap between a housewife and the prison inmates, a commoner, an inmate and a third audience who get to know the nature of prison life, even if in a subtle manner.

Alokanda Roy’s continuous effort in merging the inmates with the society is reflected through the various programmes organized by her in front of the public eye. Dance dramas provide immense insight into our mind, a taste of the psychological states, reflections of the essence of the ‘*swaroopa*’ or the true form, it transforms the text into something palpable, a tangible enterprise which creates meanings innumerable. It offers us a teleological, a historical and cultural

<sup>7</sup> Gready Paul. *Autobiography and the Power of Writing: Political prison writing in the Apartheid Era*. (Gready, Abstract)

<sup>8</sup> Coorlawala, Uttara Asha. “The Sanskritized Body.” *Dance Research Journal* 36 (Coorlawala, 19)

insignia to the internalization of drama as knowledge and power structure, here reflecting the nature of the prison society and an effort to posit a normalization of the guilty. "Teaching in prison was a chance to see the value of literature outside the structure of the university where the worth of art is one of the givens. This class reaffirmed the values, appeal, and worth of literature for a whole spectrum of students"<sup>9</sup>.

In memoirs, the subjectivity of influence (of the author) is omnipresent, once you make a film out of a nonfiction, you engage in variation and visual and auditory supplements. In the film or the theatre, the power of dialogue and diction, the didactic nature of wisdom makes it emerge as a 'sattva' itself, the text traversing ages of creation and dissolution. As a discourse of knowledge, it portrays the power of performance, the language of theatre, the technicalities of a play and the grammar of theatre. *Natya* or drama as an art form withholds us from the very ignorance of self and manifests in itself 'rasa,' the soul of being.

Prison discourse posits questions of varied nature and importance, concerning the condition of inmates. What strikes us to the core is the slight nuances of dance dramas played by these inmates, the gravity of its compilation, a seeking of "truth", as the sole constituent of knowledge where the cognitive system is in itself reductive and confined. *Natya* serves as the alternative medium of resistance, a discourse on the caste system, on the politics of sexuality and gender, on the different art forms which it embeds within itself, on human psychology, on Indian mythography, and the typology of plays as such. It engages us in the various possibilities of performances, aspects of drama, a merging of the real life and the imitative reality. *Natya* in *Muktodhara* presents us with perspectives for historical, cultural, mythical, economic, social and political dialectics in the Indian scenario. In a multilingual text, we cannot but overlook the fact that drama, subsumes within itself all the art forms, making them an integral part of Indian culture and heritage and benignly influences modes of dramatic representation. *Natya* is, in fact, a representation of varied forms of art and a treatise on the states of mind and matter. It has the many elements of the auditory and the visual, acoustics and the vocal, the body movements and the mental, the idea of 'saarvathibaad' as opposed to the ideas of non-being, ignorance, and unconsciousness. It is, in fact, this modern contra approach which has given *natya* an immense potentiality to emerge as global knowledge. New avenues of knowledge open up from the text, *natya* ideally, creates such a knowledge platform, which mediates between cultural dichotomies and perceptions effectively to provide a discourse on global theatre traditions and practices. A study of prisons has gained importance over the years allowing inmates to travel overseas and have been widely accepted in spite of being topographically placed.

Dance drama in prison, as a discourse of knowledge, serves to enhance the quality of living and promises to an existential crisis, a pre-dominant flaw of modernity. One more thing that the theatrical space does is to add new dimensions to literature per se. It makes literature accessible to all the classes and also modifies it to a great extent. The dramatist might introduce new techniques, props, background or settings as and when necessary to elevate the profundity of the scene or to make subtle changes in the plot.

Theatre space primarily explores the possibilities of theatre, stage devices, performance and the art of drama. It is essential for both the audience and the actors to understand and enact the beauty and sensuality of the bhavas and rasas, the expressions and movements, the music and the dialogue. It brings out the true art form as set against the deceptive reality

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<sup>9</sup> Literature and Prison John White *English Education* Vol. 8 (White, 173)

of other art forms. Because drama is a perceptual knowledge unlike other forms, it must be kept in mind that space should be made in such a way to create the maximum effect on the spectators. Theatre space is to mediate the gulf between the actor and the spectator, the dialogical relationship between them.

Theatre space melds the tragedy and creates the comedy, and it is for that space that the tragic and the comic are rendered so. The consciousness of 'dramatic being' both in the actors and the audience is contained within that space. The whole trilogy between the character-actor-spectator is brought out through this medium. The intrinsic relationship between the spectator and the stage is the main component of dramatic discourse. The understanding of the rasa and culmination of the bhava through it brings out the actuality of 'dramatic mellifluousness'. Thus, theatre space gives life to the play or drama and the various aspects attached to it.

"Relocating the self from the prison into alternative relationships, the prison writer never writes simply of or for him or herself. Writing into a resistant context is an act of dissociation, of verbal doubling. The position from which the prison writer writes makes inevitable, even if not always self-conscious that the most personal expression will speak back to the system that places human beings inside cells."<sup>10</sup> The idea of looking at movies as a pedagogical and epistemological tool to understand prison structures has been limited in this country. Even the understanding of the prison space as a correctional facility is only developing with time. While the prison space shifts from the security-centric to the correctional, from pathos to artistic it establishes and alters the horizon of expectations already created by the text through various theatrical devices. A mixture of the three, the film, the theatre, and the text, the movement from the punitive to the correctional to the literary, traces the entire genre of prison discourse.

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<sup>10</sup> Larson Doran. *Toward a Prison Poetics*. *College Literature* Vol. 37 (Larson, 147).

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