

INCARCERATED BODY AND FREE MIND:
A KRISHNAMURTIAN STUDY OF ANJUM
ZAMARUD HABIB'S MEMOIR *PRISONER NO. 100*

Vidisha Gupta*

Abstract

When it comes to the genre of life narratives, autobiographies and biographies occupy the center stage. Memoirs, especially prison memoirs, remain away from the discourse. More, when prison memoirs are talked about, those written by women are found on the margins. From the time immemorial, prison is seen as a space of trauma, stress, and confinement (Foucault 1961). Resistance to existing physical and corresponding mental condition makes prison memoirs important for literary studies. Themes of these prison narratives vary from human rights violation to violation of their sense of hope and faith to unparalleled struggle for the liberation. The proposed paper intends to explore the aspects that challenge the existing stereotypes of prison narrative with special reference to the Indian Female Prison Memoir *Prisoner No. 100* (2003) by Anjum Zamarud Habib. It gives us a critical glimpse into the unique ways of resistance by the prisoner and thus a different form of activism to acquire the psychological freedom in spite of being physically in jail. Further, the paper intends to examine the reality and the process, which allow the controlled and hegemonized mind to transcend the boundary of physical and symbolic confinement for attaining the state of universality, harmony and radiance of the aesthetic world, which is defined by the realities of beauty and sublimity. Furthermore, the paper therefore may contextualize the Krishnamurti's idea of freedom of the mind and some aspects of the aesthetic theory of the East as well as the West.

Keywords: Prison memoir, Freedom, Mind, Incarcerated Body

*Research Scholar, Department of English, Vanasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan.

Freedom is a state of mind—not freedom from something . . . a freedom to doubt and question everything and therefore, so intense, active, and vigorous that it throws away every form of dependence, slavery, conformity and acceptance. ~ Jiddu Krishnamurti.

Prison Literature is a literary genre, written while the writer is confined or after he comes out of the prison. It can be about prison, informed by prison, or merely written while the writer is incarcerated. It involves all kinds of genres such as novel, short story, poem, memoir, biography, autobiography, essay, and drama. This form of literature has a vast range of themes which can be taken up for different critical studies. They vary from resisting the domination to struggling for the liberation and from the human rights violation to the violation of their sense of hope and faith. Many prison memoirs exhibit the experiences of recovering from abuse, addiction, and trauma while some others also include the persistent struggle of the prisoner to overcome the entrapment of her mind along with the body.

Prison literature has laid the foundation of the emergence of the personal truth of the incarcerated as revisiting the past with a new critical lens is “cathartic” (C.L. Khatri 2016) in nature. Prison literature is not always the literature of pain, suffering, and depression with the feeling of guilt and shame, but it can be a literature of growth also. For instance, Indian Independence literature cannot be complete without prison literature and the theme of growth in it. Prison literature is important because the prison writers due to the association of the social stigma and the state propaganda with their identity have always been on the margin and so is the case with their creative expressions. Resistance to existing physical and the corresponding mental condition is what makes prison literature relevant for academic studies. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, defines resistance as “an act of opposing something from happening.” The resistance in prison literature is twofold: by writing about their actually lived experiences, the prison writers are trying to unlearn their situations, which have been killing them before their actual death. Secondly, they attempt to bring the literature in the limelight to remove all the prejudices associated with it. Writings of the wrongly imprisoned people are more suppressed and marginalized than that of actual criminals as it suits the system’s purpose to falsely implicate them. In this way, the literature of the marginalized is further marginalized. The good thing about the resistance literature from the most oppressed is that it is born out of the injustices experienced, the regrets, the psychic damages, and

the unremitting pain and therefore is more spontaneous, real, and authentic.

The solitude of prison house has led many minds to free themselves from the authority of the known and inspired them to write masterpieces and express themselves beautifully in diverse genres. “To write is to resist,” voices C. L. Khatri in *Prism of Prison: An Overview of Prison Literature*. With the sanitized soul, the prisoners distil their surroundings through writing and give themselves a sense of freedom and the rights on their own lives. James Joyce once spoke of artists, “‘Squeeze us, we are olives,’ meaning writers yield their best in times of torment,” quotes K. Satchindanandan in *A Poet’s Diversion Around A Pothole* (2015).

When freedom in prison is talked about, where nothing corresponding to freedom seems to reside, it changes its meaning from the freedom of the incarcerated body to the freedom of the mind as Mahatma Gandhi states in his autobiography “no one can imprison . . . [our] mind”. Freedom of mind in the chained body becomes a possibility in the prison because the prisoners are free to go beyond their prevailing circumstances spiritually only. Hamlet expressed the similar notion when he said “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space.” Ahmad and Siddiqui in their article, “Democracy in Jail: Over-Representation of Minorities in Indian Prisons” indicate that people in prison generate a notion of democracy in their thoughts and are at utmost level of freedom in themselves. Though bodies remain confined in prison, freedom of mind in the chained body becomes a possibility because people in isolation have nothing to do but think. They think about their moods, their impulses and analyses them, as they are limitless by mind, they can think of anything. They are free to go beyond their prevailing circumstances and hence can free themselves intellectually. Enlightened ones are always determined and do not let imprisonment lead to mental detention and metal slavery. Richard Lovelace in “To Althea: From Prison” writes:

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Mind innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage. (78)

Krishnamurti, a world-renowned philosopher, writer, and public speaker dealing with day-to-day inner life issues such as human freedom, fear, suffering, violence, love, learning, and interpersonal relationships, was born in Madras (India), on 12 May 1895 and

groomed by Annie Besant as the World Teacher. Throughout his public life, he believed that no outer system or organization could lead human beings to the path of freedom. For freeing the mind, a complete transformation of the human psyche is required. His multigenre literature is published in around forty books available in different languages across the world. *Commentaries on Living*, *Krishnamurti's Notebook*, *Education and the Significance of Life*, *The First and Last Freedom*, *Freedom from the Known*, and *Krishnamurti to Himself: His Last Journal* are examples of his most celebrated works.

“To exist authentically in the highest degree” (Sartre 1956) should be the aim of every man. Krishnamurti contributed enormously to the understanding of “Authentic Living.” According to him, “Authentic living” can only be achieved by human evolution and human evolution is attained by total awareness, observation, and unconditioning, leading to the freedom of the mind. Krishnamurti beautifully explained, “The idea of a free mind is to look inward with the patience and alertness” (Krishnamurti, *Truth and Actuality*, 2000). He stressed the need for revolution, not religious, social, or political, but revolution of the psyche, i.e., the holistic transformation from within.

According to Krishnamurti, freedom is a state of mind where there is neither choice nor confusion. A state of mind in which human being is free from worldly conditioning: conflict, sorrow, fear, and the past. It is pure observation and choiceless awareness of “what is” (Krishnamurti 2020). Thus, freedom from the known rather than the freedom to choose is the kernel of his teachings. To quote him further “Freedom is a state of mind—not freedom from something . . . a freedom to doubt and question everything and therefore, so intense, active, and vigorous that it throws away every form of dependence, slavery, conformity and acceptance” (*Freedom from the Known* 98)

What happens to the mind and the body in a ruptured space like prison is the interest of this paper. It explores how the space of confinement can also work as a place of empowerment and of freedom. Critically examining the prison memoir of Anjum Zamarud Habib, *Prisoner No. 100*, it highlights how Anjum challenges the existing stereotypes of prison narratives. Published in 2014, this book explains what happens to a Kashmiri woman activist who aspires for the freedom of Kashmir. The crime of Habib, the narrator, is her presence in a wrong place at a wrong time. She was arrested after she collected her visa from the Pakistan Embassy as she was going to Pakistan to deliver a lecture and for that only she

had to spend five years in prison under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). Along with the issue of the injustice, she also raises the questions of domination of patriarchy in politics. She narrates how she was neglected and thrown away by the male colleagues of her organization, Hurriyat Conference. The work is apparently an account of the injustices done to the minorities and the abuse of power in the prison. Habib's narrative evidences her awareness of her worldly identity as Kashmiri Muslim woman and refers to the impressions of Kashmir and Kashmiris in the eyes of the jailers and the inmates. The impressions, she says, reflect the prejudices built up by the mainstream media throughout the nation.

Her story tells about unique forms of resistance by Kashmiri women prisoners in spite of being invisible in the mainstream prison literature. To provide a critical glimpse into these unique ways to acquire the psychological freedom and growth of the protagonist while being in the prison is one of the mainstays of this paper. In addition, how women's space allows them to experience an alternative freedom via establishing an alternative community is what the paper is going to discuss. With the help of Krishnamurti's idea of freedom of the mind, it tries to demonstrate the prison experience as transformational, which can help the incarcerated body to overcome the inner chains and realize her authentic self.

In *Life in Freedom*, Krishnamurti states that human freedom is incomplete without internal freedom, i.e., freedom from 'within.' The gateway to this freedom, he says, is constant awareness to see things as they are without any choice or condemnation: "Awareness brings freedom" (*The First and Last Freedom* 157) and awareness is "observation without condemnation" (156). Further, he believes that through this silent observation in the present, the individual starts deconditioning, i.e., unlearning his thought which has been keeping her from understanding and thus knowing her true self-identity. Deconditioning begins with constant questioning the system one lives in. Krishnamurti maintains that understanding the self via awareness and unconditioning is the beginning of freedom.

'Choiceless awareness' and 'unconditioning' of the past while being in present makes the individual get rid of the imposed cultural identity. It becomes possible because the negative human traits like fear, insecurity, anger, revenge, hate, misery, and loneliness inflicted upon her by the outer world identity start disappearing slowly due to her realization of the true self, creating a deep sense of calmness, authenticity, powerfulness, completeness, empathy, love, and satisfaction in her. Krishnamurti communicates "being with what is"

(236), “[s]eeing the false as the false and the true as the true” (263), and thus “complete understanding of whole process of ‘me’” (256) is what brings a total transformation in the individual. As a result knowing herself wholly an individual achieves her individuality, the freedom of the mind.

Poems in her memoir reveal the notion of romance and alternative freedom she carries within herself regardless of being in prison. Beginning her book with an exceptional poem of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, she exudes the quality in her sense of the freedom of self-expression:

As the skylight darkened in the cell, I knew
That stars must be shining in your hair
When the chains around me began to glisten, I learnt
That dawn must have touched your face. (1)

These lines portray the oppression in the beginning but the passion and resistance shift the course of the theme to the “democracy” as suggest Ahmad and Siddiqui in their article “Democracy in Jail.” The shift from “darkness” to “dawn” (1) signifies an immortal yearning of her imprisoned soul to see the morning of the liberty. The word “glisten” signifies her refusal to accept submissively her condition of confinement acknowledging the freedom that exists within her.

Like many other prison memoirs, *Prisoner No. 100* also has the traits of suffering, grief, misery, anguish and isolation. However, along with that her memoir is marked to be a site of psychological awakening too. The aesthetic aspects of her memoir offer an atypical mode of the portrayal, challenging the already existing modes. She extends an act of radical political protest and human right debate when she says, “The jail provides the worst example of dehumanization and devaluation of one’s life and dignity (2). Yenna Wu, in Introduction to “*Human Rights, Suffering and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*” states that some prison memoirs contribute to knowledge production. Anjum’s memoir proposes a critique of the system in power that decided to silent her voice and of the institution of literature by writing, as she demands to be read within a larger setting does the same. Acknowledging aesthetic aspects of prison narratives is acknowledging the fact that prisoners claim some sort of freedom over their bodily confinement. Her memoir presents the quotidian acts of resisting her physical conditions to have some control over her life. Janet Hart, inspired by the idea of “popular aesthetics” coined the term “political prison aesthetics” which means to focus on routine practices that turns the terrible situations of life into a source of pride. When Foucault described

the prison in the ‘power-knowledge’ terminology in “*Discipline and Punishment*” perhaps, he forgot to mention the creative and strategic means of the prisoners. Michel de Certeau through his essay “The Practice of Everyday Life” drew our attention to “microresistances” prisoners practice as survival strategies of the instinct to subvert the all-controlling authority of the penal system.

According to Krishnamurti, freedom of mind begins with constant awareness, to see things as they are without any choice or condemnation. “Awareness brings freedom” (*The First and Last Freedom* 157) and awareness is “observation without condemnation” (156). Krishnamurti states that change in the attitude of a human being in socio-political scenario comes with the ‘choiceless observation’ and ‘awareness’ of the surroundings. Anjum started her journey towards ‘freedom of mind’ by keenly observing and being aware of how routine aspects of daily life change meaning inside prison. “Sound of the keys” (Anjum xvi) indicates time of day and night, “bathing”, “changing clothes”, “a full bucket of hot waters in winter” (xvi) become more of a luxury than a basic need, “falling ill” (xvi), is no less than a curse in jail, and sending a letter and receiving one “held a different meaning here” (123).

“The process,” Krishnamurti communicates, can start from anywhere, because it eventually reaches the same place. One need to be more ‘awakened’ and ‘question everything’ to be free from ‘dependence’, ‘slavery’, and ‘acceptance.’ Anjum, by constantly questioning her existence and the system she was living in, started her journey of awakening. She points out “the very meaning of my existence has changed” (25) signifying the influence of the prison on her life. Questioning everything in her day-to-day life from what brings a prisoner to the prison in general to her presence in the prison in particular. Anjum started paying attention to minute details like the increases in number of prisoners during winter for “night shelters” and for “two square meals a day” (41), “bribe scenes in prison” (52), “tobacco trade” (51), etc. Krishnamurti says, by acknowledging negative traits like fear one can overcome them. She acknowledges her fear when she says, “maybe it was our own inner fear that reflected in his eyes” (31) and progressed to be fearless. She puts, “we women are not afraid of death” (48). She realized her true self, which Krishnamurti says, is not different from any other human on the planet, creating a deep sense of calmness, authenticity, powerfulness, completeness, empathy, love, and satisfaction in her. She also started understanding her worldly identity by questioning how the male members of her organization did not enquire about her

because “they did not wish to encourage a woman’s leadership role” (22) in a patriarchal setup. Being a Kashmiri, she highlights how a minority has to face more discrimination than others emphasizing the prison as a microcosm of the nation. Talking of marginalization, she focuses on the distribution of works inside the jail based on their castes and status. By including narratives of other prisoners, she highlights that prison provides a narrative space for people from different social class, educational background, and political interest which results into heteroglossia of multiple narratives. This heteroglossia of multiple narratives, in turns by interacting, gives rise to political awakening.

Analyzing the prison life in general she says , it is completely a “different world” operating on “master-slave hierarchy” (68). In the prison, individuality of the prisoners is no longer their own, they “are treated like insects” (68), as she asserts, “our very existence, our individuality is merged into that of the ‘jail community’” (35). Observing prison life minutely she infers, prisoners look for happiness in “small and simple activities that perhaps have no meaning in the outside world” (101). In addition, she mentions that jail authorities are not free from “religious prejudice” (52). She adds that jail “destroys noble thoughts” (141) but it also “makes one stronger” (92). Krishnamurti believes that through this silent observation in the present, the individual starts deconditioning, i.e., unlearning her thoughts which have been keeping her from understanding and thus knowing her true self. He also believes all the troubles of life disappear with the element of fearlessness. Anjum fearlessly questions the system for their religious prejudices and conveys, “For my part I felt a strong sense of courage within me” (51). Further, she pinpoints that jail has imprinted several serious complex questions like “what difference does a prisoner’s death make to the jail staff?” which still echo “in her mind and she will continue to seek answers to them.” (108)

Krishnamurti in *The Urgency of Change* elaborates that being aware about one’s conditioning is the ultimate step towards negation. To negate all the experiences, learning, and teaching and everything we consider being positive by choiceless awareness and observation without accumulation and constant questioning is unconditioning and thus “freedom.” The emptiness that comes with the total negation of everything includes the space for creation. It is only in this emptiness something new can take place. Through experiences, we do not learn to live in the right relationship with other men. The emptiness gives birth to courage, love, and compassion. One begins

to understand that division between community and individual is false and there is no “me.” Moreover, the action of “me” can stop if one begins to see “the whole thing”.

Anjum, in the beginning of her memoir appears to be religiously prejudiced talking about herself and her community repeatedly. She writes, “In Indian jails, Kashmiri prisoners’ lives are hell” (36) and “Kashmiri prisoners” (14) have no respect at all. The words like “Indian” and “Kashmiri” substantiates her thinking in divisions and not of the whole. However, later in the book, she portrays prison as a space of growth and writes that prison gave her the opportunity to meet and learn from different kind of women that would have been impossible otherwise (194). Further, she begins to uncondition herself and started to shift from the authoritative ‘I’ to the inclusive ‘I’. Doran Larson in his article, “Towards a Prison Poetics” explains this with “dissociative-associative trope” as shift from personal autobiography to public testament. Hart Janet in “Tales from the Walled City: Aesthetics of Political Prison culture in Post war Greece” remarks that the use of “language of the plural self” in the prison memoirs testifies the community/collective living. Anjum’s idiom later in the book suggests the collective living, as she begins to use words like “we,” “us,” “our,” “prisoners” (in general), etc. She writes: “prisoners [in general] are therefore a helpless and a powerful lot” (50), “a worried and anxious lot...” and “prisoners are tired of silently obeying the jail authorities” (71), signifying that her memoir is the multilayered archive of collective pain and suffering. Anjum started living in the present by unconditioning and focusing on her surroundings and rising above herself. She pens, “True worship is to live and to help the oppressed to rise....” (61) and “the impact of the mental stress and physical discomfort on a prisoner [in general] attending court for one day lasts for the next three or four days” (43). Liberation, Krishnamurti maintains, is a state in which all of the ‘I’ consciousness ceases. Anjum begins to drop her conditioning and all the “me” thoughts of her disappear slowly. Krishnamurti says, “The root of all conditioning is the thought,” which gives rise to “me”—a phenomenon “in the realm of past” (*The Urgency of Change*).

Inspired by the ideas of Certeau’s “everyday resistance” (quoted in *Freedom in Confinement*) and Cvetkovich’s “crafting as political power of everyday struggle” (quoted in *Freedom in Confinement*), it can be concluded that for keeping the spirit high in a place like prison, prisoners need to create one’s own laws to resist the maddening surroundings. Anjum too maintained some personal activities like bathing, wearing a set of new clothes, and offering Namaz, which are

difficult to maintain in prison. She also started performing creative activities like painting, candle making, etc. in the prison, the habits which became the “source of strength” and provided courage to her. The candles she made for her family members can be seen as a metaphor for “joy/freedom/light sent out to the outside world” (quoted in Hulya 2019). Her creative time corresponds to her time of freedom taking refuge in the present, which Krishnamurti describes as “living the present” forgetting about past and future.

Anjum tries to raise the issue of social inequalities through the medium of literature. She crosses the boundaries set by society for a woman in general, a prisoner and a writer in particular. She writes for women “rarely seen by others” (qtd. in Mende 2012), remains obsessed with the idea of justice, and resists oppression at every point of time. Hence, her memoir is a space of freedom offering literary justice to those women who were denied such justice by the society. It debunks the prejudices against women by underlining the female solidarity shared by all the women within the prison space.

Thus, Anjum’s memoir challenges the existing stereotypes of prison narratives and portrays prison as a space of freedom. Using Krishnamurtian sense of freedom which means, freedom from the past, freedom from authority, freedom from fear, freedom from religious and social groups, freedom from tradition, and freedom to understand the conditioned mind and to live with ‘what is,’ this paper notes the transformational prison experience of Anjum leading her to an enormous psychological and emotional growth. By the end of the book, she is a keen observer, seems fearless, compassionate and full of courage. She wrote prisoners “should be treated with compassion and affection” (54), so they could be released from constant agony; Krishnamurti calls this trait “the ultimate truth”. She represents prison as a space of freedom of self-expression and self-assertion. Freedom is the activity of the mind, which takes birth in nothingness. To acknowledge the conditioned mind is to acknowledge the state of emptiness. Anjum says many a time that her mind is “blank, completely empty” (4) and emotionally balanced as “there was neither happiness nor a sense of sorrow” (217). A critical analysis of the memoir tells us about the unique ways of resistance offered by the prisoner to attain the psychological freedom. She continues to grow despite her surroundings and the state power as “the sun shines in the jail too” (163).

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