



PRISON TRAUMA AS PSYCHOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE: READING CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PRISON NARRATIVES

Paramjeet Kaur & Dr. Mohd Rafi

Research Scholar, Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, India.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, India.

ABSTRACT

Prison literature has emerged as one of the most significant literary genres for understanding the relationship between state power, violence, memory, and resistance. Unlike conventional prison narratives that merely document incarceration, contemporary Indian prison memoirs expose the psychological and political mechanisms through which imprisonment functions as an instrument of state control. The prison becomes not merely a site of physical confinement but a space where identity, dignity, memory, and subjectivity are systematically assaulted. This paper examines prison trauma through a comparative reading of Iftikhar Gilani's *My Days in Prison*, Anjum Zamarud Habib's *Prisoner No. 100*, and Kobad Ghandy's *Fractured Freedom*. Drawing upon theories of trauma, prison literature, and state power, the study argues that these memoirs transform personal suffering into political testimony. While each narrative emerges from distinct ideological and socio-political contexts, they collectively reveal the psychological consequences of arbitrary arrests, prolonged incarceration, custodial violence, isolation, and legal uncertainty. At the same time, the memoirs demonstrate that writing itself becomes an act of survival, resistance, and self-preservation against institutional violence. By analysing the intersection of trauma, memory, and political imprisonment, the paper seeks to demonstrate that contemporary Indian prison narratives function not merely as autobiographical accounts but as powerful critiques of the carceral state and its continuing reliance on colonial legal frameworks.

Keywords: Prison Trauma, Prison Literature, Political Violence, State Power, Testimony, Memory, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Prison literature occupies a distinctive place within world literature because it emerges from one of the most restrictive spaces created by human civilization. Throughout history, prisons have served not merely as institutions of punishment but also as mechanisms through which states try to maintain law and order but there is a huge gap between the fundamentals of prison and the institutional realities. Instead of disciplining criminals the state is exercising authority over bodies, identities, and political dissent. Consequently, prison writing has developed as a literary response to incarceration. It documents experiences that remain inaccessible to the outside world. As Mohammad Ameen Parray and Ahsan Ul Haq Magray in *The Consolation of Philosophy as a Prison Narrative* observe, prison

literature comprises “the body of fictional and non-fictional work that incarcerated writers and thinkers have produced behind the bars” (94). Rather than simply narrating imprisonment, these writings preserve memory, resist institutional silence, and challenge dominant political narratives.

The prison, however, represents far more than a physical structure. It is fundamentally a psychological institution designed to regulate behaviour through surveillance, isolation, humiliation, and uncertainty. As Parray and Magray argue, prison is “a place of total torment” where individuals are subjected to the systematic denial of freedom and identity (94). Such conditions produce profound psychological consequences that frequently extend beyond the period of incarceration. Trauma, therefore, becomes inseparable from the prison



experience, affecting not only the body but also memory, relationships, and the prisoner's perception of self.

The emergence of contemporary Indian prison memoirs has significantly expanded the scope of prison literature by foregrounding experiences of political incarceration under laws such as the Official Secrets Act (1923), the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). These narratives expose how legal mechanisms which intends to protect national security frequently becomes instrument for suppressing dissent and extending state authority over citizens. As Rivkah Zim argues in *The Consolations of Writing*, writing becomes one of the prisoner's most enduring methods of preserving moral integrity under conditions of persecution, enabling prisoners to resist "corrosion of fear, uncertainty and disinformation" through literary expression (Zim 1).

This paper examines prison trauma as both psychological and political violence through a comparative study of three contemporary Indian prison memoirs: Iftikhar Gilani's *My Days in Prison*, Anjum Zamarud Habib's *Prisoner No. 100*, and Kobad Ghandy's *Fractured Freedom*. Although these writers differ in ideological background, region, gender, and political affiliation, their narratives converge in exposing the structural violence embedded within the modern carceral system. As demonstrated in the comparative analysis of these memoirs, each writer experiences imprisonment not as an isolated legal event but as an enduring process of surveillance, humiliation, identity fragmentation, and resistance. Together, these texts reveal how prison functions as a political institution that disciplines dissent while simultaneously generating testimonial narratives that challenge official histories and reclaim individual agency. Ultimately, this study argues that prison trauma extends beyond physical confinement. The selected memoirs demonstrate that psychological suffering is deliberately produced through prolonged uncertainty, social isolation, institutional violence, and the constant negotiation between hope and despair. Yet these narratives also reveal the transformative potential of writing itself. As Barbara Harlow observes, prison writings become "collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle" (120).

In this sense, contemporary Indian prison memoirs not only document trauma but also transforms individual suffering into collective political memory and literary resistance.

PRISON TRAUMA AS PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Trauma occupies a central position in contemporary prison literature because incarceration extends far beyond the physical deprivation of liberty. Modern prisons function not merely as institutions of punishment but as mechanisms that regulate the body, discipline the mind, and reconstruct the prisoner's identity through continuous surveillance, uncertainty, humiliation, and isolation. While imprisonment undoubtedly inflicts physical suffering but its most enduring consequences are psychological. Political prisoners, in particular, experience trauma not because of criminal guilt but because they become subjects of institutional violence carried out in the name of national security, public order, or state sovereignty. Consequently, prison memoirs emerge as powerful testimonies that reveal how trauma is produced, internalized, remembered, and eventually narrated.

Prison literature consistently demonstrates that imprisonment begins long before the prison gate closes behind the accused. The trauma originates with arbitrary arrest, public humiliation, prolonged interrogation, and the sudden collapse of ordinary life. As Parray and Magray observe, prison is psychologically "a place of total torment" where individuals are systematically deprived of their ordinary identity and subjected to institutional control (94). The prisoner's former social roles such as journalist, activist, intellectual, or citizen are replaced by a number, a charge sheet, and a criminal identity imposed by the state. Such psychological dislocation becomes one of the defining characteristics of political imprisonment.

This transformation is vividly reflected in Iftikhar Gilani's *My Days in Prison*. Arrested under the Official Secrets Act, Gilani repeatedly emphasizes that the accusation itself became a form of punishment before any judicial determination of guilt. His memoir demonstrates that trauma is intensified by uncertainty rather than merely by physical confinement. Throughout his



incarceration, he confronts the anxiety of not knowing when or whether his innocence will be acknowledged or not. The prolonged legal process transforms imprisonment into a psychological condition in which hope and despair constantly alternate. As Gilani himself observes, the Official Secrets Act “is a draconian law” that contains few safeguards against misuse, allowing suspicion to replace evidence in matters concerning national security (Gilani 182). The psychological burden of such arbitrary prosecution extends beyond prison walls, producing fear, social alienation, and the persistent feeling of being watched even after release.

The comparative dimension of contemporary Indian prison narratives further reveals that psychological trauma assumes different forms according to gender, class, region, and political identity. The comparative study of Gilani, Anjum Zamarud Habib, and Kobad Ghandy demonstrates that although their ideological positions differ considerably, all three memoirs converge around experiences of wrongful detention, prolonged uncertainty, institutional violence, and the gradual erosion of personal identity. These narratives collectively expose shared themes of state violence, legal manipulation, identity, resistance, and the compulsion to testify, revealing imprisonment as a structural rather than an individual phenomenon.

Anjum Zamarud Habib’s *Prisoner No. 100* expands this understanding by foregrounding the specifically gendered dimensions of prison trauma. Unlike many male prison memoirs, Habib’s narrative illustrates how women prisoners endure psychological violence through isolation from family, gendered surveillance, cultural displacement, and emotional deprivation. Her imprisonment in Tihar Jail as the only Kashmiri woman prisoner intensified feelings of loneliness and social estrangement. she writes, “There is no respect for Kashmiri prisoners in jail; they are treated with such hatred and contempt there. I was the only Kashmiri woman in jail 6, in fact in the entire jail. I was in an alien city, amongst alien people, in a large a terrifying space. I was the only woman in all of Hindustan, a Kashmiri woman, arrested under POTA.” (30).

Trauma, therefore, emerges not simply from incarceration itself but from the continuous denial of emotional relationships that sustain personal identity. The

prison attempts to sever connections with home, family, and community, thereby weakening the prisoner’s capacity to resist institutional authority.

Kobad Ghandy’s *Fractured Freedom* presents yet another dimension of psychological suffering by illustrating the cumulative effects of prolonged incarceration. Unlike Gilani’s relatively shorter imprisonment, Ghandy’s nearly decade-long confinement reveals that trauma intensifies with time rather than stabilizing through adaptation. The gradual depletion of emotional resilience, uncertainty regarding release, and repeated postponement of justice transform imprisonment into what may be described as an extended psychological assault. As Ghandy writes, “The second year in prison was far more difficult than the first. The initial hope of an early release has disappeared, and the endless routine, uncertainty and delay slowly began to wear one down” (*Fractured Freedom*, p.183). This observation underscores the long-term nature of prison trauma, distinguishing it from temporary experiences of suffering.

The memoirs also reveal that trauma extends beyond the prisoner’s individual consciousness to encompass family and social relationships. Political imprisonment produces what may be called collective trauma, affecting spouses, parents, children, and entire communities. Visits become heavily regulated encounters governed by institutional rules, while correspondence is subjected to surveillance and censorship. Such restrictions deepen psychological isolation by preventing the prisoner from maintaining meaningful social bonds. Consequently, the prison functions not only as a space of confinement but also as an apparatus that systematically reorganizes emotional life according to bureaucratic discipline.

Writing itself becomes the principal means through which these prisoners resist psychological disintegration. Rather than allowing institutional violence to define their identities, the memoirists reconstruct themselves through narrative. Rivkah Zim argues that “prisoners frequently write in order to preserve themselves morally against fear, uncertainty, and repression, making writing one of the most durable methods of survival” (Zim 1).

This insight is particularly relevant to the selected memoirs, where narration functions simultaneously as testimony, memory, therapy, and political intervention.



By documenting suffering, the writers refuse the silence that prison seeks to impose upon them.

Thus, prison trauma in contemporary Indian prison narratives cannot be understood merely as an individual psychological condition. It is produced through the interaction of legal systems, political institutions, disciplinary practices, and state power. The selected memoirs demonstrate that arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, custodial violence, surveillance, and uncertainty constitute interconnected mechanisms through which psychological violence is exercised upon political prisoners. At the same time, these narratives affirm that memory and writing remain powerful forms of resistance capable of preserving human dignity even within the most oppressive carceral environments. Through the act of narration, trauma is transformed into testimony, ensuring that experiences intended to remain hidden become part of the public archive of resistance.

PRISON TRAUMA AS POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Contemporary prison literature demonstrates that trauma cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological experience. It is equally a political phenomenon that is produced by institutions to regulate, discipline, and punish dissent. Political imprisonment differs fundamentally from ordinary criminal incarceration because it arises not from conventional criminality but from ideological conflict between the individual and the state. Consequently, the prison becomes an extension of political power where legal procedures, investigative agencies, surveillance, and prolonged detention operate together to silence opposition. The selected prison memoirs reveal that psychological trauma is inseparable from these political structures, exposing how incarceration functions as an instrument of governance rather than merely an apparatus of justice.

The relationship between state power and imprisonment has long occupied an important position within prison studies. Modern prisons do not merely punish unlawful acts; they also regulate political identities by constructing particular individuals as threats to national security. Such criminalisation frequently occurs through exceptional legislation that grants extraordinary powers to investigative agencies while simultaneously restricting

the rights of the accused. The consequences of these legal mechanisms become particularly visible in prison memoirs because they document the lived experience of individuals who confront the state not as abstract citizens but as imprisoned bodies.

The comparative study of Iftikhar Gilani, Anjum Zamarud Habib, and Kobad Ghandy demonstrates that although each writer was prosecuted under a different legal framework, their experiences collectively expose a common pattern of political incarceration. Gilani was arrested under the Official Secrets Act (1923), Habib under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), and Ghandy under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). Despite these legal differences, the memoirs reveal similar experiences of prolonged detention, delayed justice, institutional suspicion, and the transformation of political identity into criminal identity. Among the three narratives, Iftikhar Gilani's memoir most explicitly demonstrates the continued influence of colonial legislation in independent India. Arrested under the Official Secrets Act, Gilani repeatedly questions both the legitimacy of the charges and the investigative procedures employed against him. Reflecting upon the legislation itself, he observes that the Official Secrets Act is "a draconian law" because it provides inadequate safeguards against misuse and therefore permits arbitrary application (Gilani 182). His criticism extends beyond personal injustice to expose the persistence of colonial legal structures within democratic governance. The memoir consequently transforms an individual experience into a broader critique of the state's reliance upon outdated security laws to regulate political expression.

The arbitrary exercise of state authority receives further emphasis in contemporary scholarship on prison literature. Discussing the misuse of exceptional legislation, Giorgio Agamben in his book *State of Exception*, argues, "The State of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (Agamben 2). His observation suggests that emergency laws, originally intended for exceptional circumstance, gradually become normalized as instruments of governance.

Anjum Zamarud Habib's *Prisoner No. 100* extends this critique by demonstrating how political violence intersects with gender, region, and identity. Her



imprisonment cannot be separated from the broader political conflict in Kashmir. As a Kashmiri political activist detained under anti-terror legislation, Habib experiences incarceration not only as an assault upon individual liberty but also as an attempt to delegitimize political identity itself. Her memoir illustrates that the prison frequently functions as an ideological institution where political affiliations are transformed into criminal evidence. Consequently, trauma assumes both psychological and political dimensions because the prisoner is compelled continually to defend not merely personal innocence but also cultural and political identity. Kobad Ghandy's *Fractured Freedom* presents perhaps the most sustained reflection on political imprisonment within the contemporary Indian context. His decade-long incarceration under the UAPA illustrates how prolonged pre-trial detention itself becomes a form of punishment irrespective of the final judicial outcome. He states, "The process itself became the punishment." (93).

A significant feature common to all three memoirs is the systematic production of uncertainty. Unlike conventional punishment, political imprisonment frequently denies prisoners knowledge of when legal proceedings will conclude or whether justice will ultimately prevail. This uncertainty produces a continuous psychological burden that extends beyond physical confinement. Delayed hearings, repeated adjournments, prolonged investigations, and bureaucratic procedures gradually transform legal process into psychological punishment. The prison therefore operates simultaneously through visible coercion and invisible anticipation, compelling prisoners to inhabit a condition of perpetual insecurity.

Equally significant is the manner in which the prison seeks to isolate political prisoners from wider public discourse. Communication with family members, lawyers, journalists, and supporters is carefully monitored and frequently restricted.

Yet the memoirs simultaneously demonstrate the limits of state power. Although imprisonment seeks to silence dissent, the act of writing transforms prison into a site of political testimony. The memoir becomes evidence against institutional violence, preserving experiences that official records frequently erase. Rather than accepting the identity imposed upon them by legal institutions,

Gilani, Habib, and Ghandy reclaim narrative authority through autobiographical writing. Their memoirs reveal that while the state may regulate movement, communication, and bodily freedom, it cannot entirely extinguish memory, intellectual reflection, or the desire to bear witness.

Thus, political violence in contemporary Indian prison narratives extends far beyond the visible act of imprisonment. It encompasses the misuse of exceptional legislation, prolonged pre-trial detention, bureaucratic delay, institutional surveillance, public criminalisation, and the continuous management of political identity. Through their memoirs, Gilani, Habib, and Ghandy expose imprisonment as a deeply political institution that disciplines dissent while simultaneously generating powerful narratives of resistance. Their writings demonstrate that prison literature is not merely the documentation of suffering but an intervention into public memory, challenging the legitimacy of those structures that transform political disagreement into criminal guilt.

WRITING AS TESTIMONY, RESISTANCE, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SURVIVAL

One of the defining characteristics of prison literature is that it transforms suffering into testimony. While the prison seeks to silence, isolate, and erase the identity of the incarcerated individual, prison writing challenges this process by preserving memory and restoring the prisoner's voice. Consequently, writing becomes much more than a literary activity; it functions as an act of psychological survival, political resistance, and historical documentation. Contemporary Indian prison memoirs repeatedly demonstrate that although the state may imprison the body, it cannot permanently imprison thought, memory, or imagination. Through the act of narration, the prisoner reclaims agency and resists the institutional attempt to reduce him or her to a criminal identity.

The relationship between writing and survival has been recognised by several scholars of prison literature. Rivkah Zim argues that prisoners frequently employ writing "to preserve and defend themselves against corrosion of fear, uncertainty and disinformation," making literary expression one of the most enduring methods of survival under conditions of persecution (Zim 1). Writing



therefore becomes an ethical act through which prisoners reconstruct identities fragmented by institutional violence. Instead of allowing prison authorities to define their lives, prisoners create alternative narratives that preserve personal truth against official versions of events. Barbara Harlow similarly observes that prison narratives are not merely individual autobiographies but “collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle” (120). This observation is particularly relevant to contemporary Indian prison memoirs because Gilani, Habib, and Ghandy consistently move beyond individual suffering to illuminate broader structures of injustice. Their memoirs repeatedly demonstrate that political imprisonment affects not only isolated individuals but entire communities whose experiences frequently remain absent from official histories. Personal memory thus becomes collective memory, while autobiography assumes the character of political testimony.

Ifthikhar Gilani’s *My Days in Prison* illustrates this transformation with remarkable clarity. Written after his release from Tihar Jail, the memoir does not merely recount his personal ordeal; it documents the functioning of investigative agencies, prison administration, and legal procedures. Gilani adopts the precision of a journalist rather than the language of vengeance, thereby transforming his memoir into an alternative historical archive. The narrative records details that official documents often omit—the emotional uncertainty of prolonged detention, everyday prison routines, the behavior of prison officials, and the psychological effects of false accusation. Through writing, Gilani contests the state’s monopoly over truth and demonstrates that memory itself can function as resistance.

Anjum Zamarud Habib’s *Prisoner No. 100* similarly employs writing to recover experiences that would otherwise remain invisible within dominant political discourse. Her narrative gives voice not only to her own suffering but also to the experiences of numerous women prisoners whose stories remain undocumented. By recording everyday interactions inside prison, Habib humanises individuals whom public discourse frequently reduces to stereotypes or anonymous prisoners. Her memoir therefore resists the dehumanising logic of

incarceration by restoring individuality, emotion, and dignity to those confined within prison walls.

Kobad Ghandy’s *Fractured Freedom* extends this testimonial tradition through sustained political reflection. Rather than presenting prison solely as a place of suffering, Ghandy analyses the ideological foundations of the Indian criminal justice system, the functioning of anti-terror legislation, and the relationship between democracy and dissent. His memoir illustrates that writing itself becomes an intellectual continuation of political resistance. Even within conditions of confinement, critical thinking remains possible, demonstrating that the prison fails to extinguish ideological commitment.

The act of remembering occupies an equally important position within these narratives. Memory enables prisoners to resist institutional attempts at psychological erasure. Family, friendships, landscapes, books, and ordinary moments from life before imprisonment become sources of emotional resilience. These recollections preserve continuity between the prisoner’s past and present, preventing imprisonment from becoming the sole determinant of identity.

The therapeutic dimension of writing also deserves attention. Trauma often fragments memory, making painful experiences difficult to articulate. Writing provides prisoners with an opportunity to organise those fragmented experiences into meaningful narratives. By narrating suffering, prisoners begin to regain control over experiences that originally appeared chaotic and incomprehensible. In this sense, prison memoirs function simultaneously as historical testimony and psychological healing. The process of narration neither erases trauma nor eliminates suffering; instead, it enables survivors to confront traumatic memory without surrendering to silence.

The significance of these memoirs extends beyond literature. They contribute to public debates concerning human rights, custodial violence, democratic accountability, and legal reform. Their narratives invite readers to question official representations of national security and justice while foregrounding the lived experiences of those subjected to exceptional legislation. Consequently, prison memoirs become important documentary interventions that preserve alternative histories of the nation.



Ultimately, the selected prison narratives demonstrate that writing constitutes one of the most powerful forms of resistance available to incarcerated individuals. Physical freedom may be temporarily denied, but intellectual freedom survives through memory, imagination, and literary expression. The prisoner's manuscript becomes evidence against institutional violence, ensuring that experiences intended to disappear within prison walls become part of public history. Contemporary Indian prison literature therefore confirms that testimony is itself a form of resistance, one that transforms personal trauma into collective memory and challenges the silence upon which systems of political oppression frequently depend.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Indian prison literature demonstrates that imprisonment is far more than a legal punishment or a temporary deprivation of liberty. Through the prison memoirs of Iftikhar Gilani, Anjum Zamarud Habib, and Kobad Ghandy, it becomes evident that incarceration functions as a complex system of psychological and political violence designed to discipline individuals, regulate dissent, and reinforce state authority. The selected narratives reveal that trauma begins long before imprisonment itself and often continues long after release. Arbitrary arrests, prolonged investigations, custodial violence, delayed justice, social alienation, and institutional surveillance collectively transform imprisonment into a deeply traumatic experience that reshapes memory, identity, and emotional life.

The comparative analysis undertaken in this paper further demonstrates that although the three memoirists differ in their political affiliations, regional identities, gender, and personal circumstances, their prison experiences reveal striking structural similarities. Each writer confronts the overwhelming power of the modern state, experiences the uncertainty produced by exceptional legal provisions, and negotiates the psychological consequences of prolonged incarceration. Their narratives expose the limitations of legal institutions that frequently prioritise national security over civil liberties and illustrate how democratic states may employ extraordinary legislation to criminalise political dissent. In doing so, these memoirs extend the scope of prison literature beyond personal recollection to

become important critiques of contemporary governance and the politics of incarceration.

The study also establishes that prison trauma cannot be reduced to physical suffering alone. The most enduring wounds documented in these memoirs are psychological: the fragmentation of identity, the erosion of certainty, the anxiety of indefinite detention, and the continuous struggle to preserve dignity under conditions of institutional control. Trauma, therefore, emerges as both an individual experience and a political strategy through which power attempts to regulate dissenting bodies and minds. Yet the memoirs simultaneously reveal that institutional violence never achieves complete victory. Through memory, reflection, and literary expression, the imprisoned subject resists psychological annihilation and reclaims moral agency.

Equally significant is the role of writing itself. As demonstrated throughout the paper, prison memoirs function simultaneously as testimony, historical documentation, psychological healing, and political resistance. Writing enables the imprisoned individual to transform personal suffering into collective memory while challenging official narratives that frequently silence or distort experiences of incarceration. In this respect, the selected memoirs continue the long tradition of prison literature represented by figures such as Boethius, Antonio Gramsci, Bhagat Singh, and Nelson Mandela, all of whom transformed confinement into intellectual and ethical resistance. Their writings affirm that although the prison may succeed in restricting physical movement, it cannot completely suppress thought, imagination, or the human capacity to create meaning.

Ultimately, *My Days in Prison*, *Prisoner No. 100*, and *Fractured Freedom* compel readers to reconsider the relationship between democracy, justice, and state power in contemporary India. Rather than presenting imprisonment as an isolated legal event, these memoirs expose it as a site where questions of citizenship, human rights, freedom of expression, and political dissent converge. They challenge readers to recognise prison not merely as an institution of punishment but as a powerful political space that reflects the ethical character of the state itself. More importantly, they reaffirm the enduring significance of prison literature as a literary and historical



archive that preserves voices otherwise threatened by institutional silence. Through their testimony, Gilani, Habib, and Ghandy transform private suffering into public memory, ensuring that prison trauma becomes not only an individual experience but also a collective call for justice, accountability, and human dignity.

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