

## Prison Writing: A Critical Study of Sunetra Choudhury's *Behind Bars*

Waseem Nabi

MPhil, Department of English, MANUU, Hyderabad

[Wraja5856@gmail.com](mailto:Wraja5856@gmail.com)

### Abstract:

*Behind Bars*, a book by the famous journalist Sunetra Choudhury is based upon the interviews she took from the different inmates. The interviews she took from these inmates include some high profile political prisoners, businessmen, and common men. Some of the political prisoners whom she interviewed are: Amar Singh, A Raja, Pappu Yadav and Peter Mukherjee. The book narrates the story of Kobad Ghandy who was a social activist and was imprisoned due to his soft corner towards naxalites. The book varies from the important murder case known as "Tandoor Murder Case" to the Raja who was banished. The book narrates the story of innocent prisoners who were put behind bars for petty crimes and were tortured, physically as well as mentally. It also talks about the poor conditions of Indian jail infrastructure. Thus, the book, *Behind Bars*, throws light upon the different aspects of prison life. It is through this book Sunetra Chaudhury tries to highlight the Indian jail system which is still based upon class hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Prison, Suffering, Hierarchy, Pain, Torture, Solitude.

### Introduction

Literature produced in jails may be termed as prison literature. And literature produced on prison writings from outside jail based upon the experiences of acquitted prisoners is also considered to be prison literature. Apart from prison inmates, people from other areas of discipline have also produced a good amount of prison writings on the basis of their visits to the different jails as well their experiences they received from different inmates. As the cruelties of prison life may not be a part of every inmate's journey (Woodsmall). Prison writings of India are quite rich. Nowadays prison writing has become an important part of literature. They recount the different psychic traumas they go through in jails. In the nineteenth century due to general literacy when there were ordinary and intelligentsia people put behind bars that a great prison literature was able to come forth (Fludernik). These prisoners have expressed their experiences of prison life through different means such as dairies, autobiographies, biographies and memoirs.

Sunetra, while taking the interview of Anca Neacsu who says:

If you steel 1000 rupees the hawaldar will beat the shit out of you and lock you up in a dungeon with no bulb or ventilation. If you steal 55,000 rupees then you get to stay in a forty foot cell which has four split units, internet fax, mobile phones and a staff of ten people to clean your shoes and cook your food(in case it is not being delivered Hayat that particular day) (Choudhury xi).

Anca Neacsu who was arrested along with controversial dealer Abhisek Verma was almost greeted with wolf whistles. Sunetra recounts the lavished life of Anca Neacsu who enjoyed all the facilities in the prison. Anca would wear a platinum blonde and aviator sun glasses whenever she was produced before the court. Here Sunetra Choudhury wants to make us comprehend that how people with sound background enjoy their lives in jails despite being hard-core criminal.

Sunetra Choudhury mentions Saharasri Subrata Roy's case saying:

[She] was sent to prison by Supreme Court for not paying back his depositors 20,000 crore, but he was given benefits which had never been seen by anybody in prison before. He is the first person in the history of tihar jail to have comforts of air conditioning. The court has also allowed Roy to use video conference facilities even Indira Gandhi did not possess these facilities when she had been to Tihar (Xii).

Sunetra tries to show the kind of treatment the people with sound background receive in the jails whereas a common man is even forced to clean the shit of other inmates. They are denied the basic facilities of life in jails. One of the most striking thematic issues that impress admirers of this genre is how the 'prison experience' explains the works of some specific authors (Braet).

One of the prisoners Sushil Sharma murdered his wife and chopped her into pieces and put the dead body in 'Tandoor' which is known as "Tandoor Murder Case." While narrating the whole incident Sushil Sharma says: "No man is born a criminal. I read that somewhere. Can you please write that when you write about me Sushil Sharma says in our last meeting before he goes back to jail after completing his furlong which is vacation time for every convict after they have completed a minimum of three years behind bars?" (Choudhury 45).

Sushil Sharma at no point denies that he killed Naina Sahni . What he does deny is that he chopped her body into pieces so that it could be cooked in the tandoor to become the perfect murder.

A K Raja who was concerned minister of telecomm industry was blamed for granting the telecom license to the other companies illegally. While interviewing him she narrates:

From the autumn of 2010, till 2012, if there is one story that dominated all headlines, it was 2G spectrum story, and as the reporter on the CBI beat, it was the only story I followed .when the winter session of the parliament started, the Comptroller and Auditorial General [CAG] report on spectrum allocation was tabled ,blaming the Ministry of telecom and its minister, A. Raja, for losses up to rupees 1-76 lakh crore in granting telecom licenses (Choudhury 99).

While narrating his jail life, he says that except air conditioning he enjoyed everything in the jail. These facilities are totally denied to the common prisoners. Whenever Raja went to the library he was followed by a group of policemen. Here, one can see how political prisoners are treated in jails.

In Kobad Ghandi's case it is pertinent to mention that how freedom of speech is curbed to the common people. Kobad, a social activist and writer, who writes about the issues faced by Naxalites or Moists was arrested and is still waiting for justice at the age of 70. Narrating the story of Kobad Ghandy Sunetra mentions:

There is no doubt that Kobad came from privileged and fine education. But steeped in the lest ideology and way of life , he did not have the wealth that would have brought him comforts in tihar jail and so his story of incarceration becomes on of an ageing man's struggling with his disintegrating body to cope with the challenges of confinements. There are files and more files and reams of paper filled with his small neat hand writing sometimes written in A4 sometimes in schoolboy's notebook begging for his medicine or describing his condition. He has to write his application after application asking for his medicines for kidney ailments, for skin infections, for his irritable bowel syndrome. He documented his experiences in letters he writes to friends like GautamVohra and lawyer RavindranathBalla in Hyderabad. They are perhaps the most exhaustive and poignant documentation of a life in jail (Choudhury 234).

While giving an account of Papu Yadav who states: "Pagpag paisa aursharir, jail meinbiktahain( at every step you have to offer, it is either money or your body up for grabs) everything in jail is for sale, even your body. Even if to want to use a working toilet, you have to pay. That is the only way to survive (Choudhury 218).

There was no dearth of money for Pappu but he still insists that the prison system in India is like death, only designed to subject pain and not to reform inmates. An idea, he insists that has only maintained the worst of British criminal justice system. 'when I write my book" jail yatra" it will rock the world, he says declaring, the law is the illegitimate mistress( rakhail) of the powerful, pappu uses very dramatic phrases but in a way, he is not too far from the truth.

Wahid Sheikh, another victim, was falsely alleged to have link with terrorist organisation and was thus accused of bomb blasts at Ghatkopar. After the investigation he was absolved from all the cases. “It was a day before Independence Day in 2006 when 29 year old English teacher Wahid Sheikh learnt the nuances of torture in custody” (Choudhury 159). All he knew was that in 2001, he had been arrested for being a suspected SIMI (Student’s Islamic movement of India) activist and being summoned by the police had become a part of his life.

The earlier torture was just to strip you, starve you one day and forced feed you another, give religious gaalis, deny you sleep for 9- 10 days- it was first and second degree. In third degree, they strip you, stretch your legs at 180 degrees and tear it, so your private parts start bleeding. We all were naked at that time and the officers and the constables were using dirty and filthy language (Choudhury 164).

Sunetra Choudhury’s book gives vivid account of jail life experienced by different people starting from the political prisoners and business prisoners. One can see how class system works in the jails and how people with rich background enjoy luxurious life even in the jails whereas the people with poor economic backgrounds lack the basic necessities of life in jails for example if we take the case of Kobad Ghandy who was a patient of kidney transplantaion and was not given the timely medicines. It is entirely the class hierarchy that works out in the jails because of which he was affected by the infection badly. It is clear how corruption works in jails, and affects poor prisoners badly. And if a prisoner wants to survive in jails he has to fill the pockets of munshis and hawaldars. In the book we come across many instances where we found that how these hawaldars and munshis keep soft corners for those who keep their pockets warm. The judicial system of the country has spoiled the number of innocent lives by accusing them falsely in some or the other cases. It is pertinent to mention here that jails are meant to reform a prisoner so that he can recognise the difference between good and bad and right or wrong. What happens in these jails in India is that the prisoners are beaten mercilessly and given death threatening tortures by which many prisoners have become mentally retarded. During the tenure of Kiran Bedi, the first IPS lady and Director General of Prisons brought some reforms in the jails system. In her first instance she averted the class system in jails. She said that those who were in the jails are all criminals so there should not be any class hierarchy in jails. She even started the IGNOU courses for prisoners so that after completing their time period in the jail they can live their lives comfortably outside jails. But the time she resigned the post all these reforms she brought were ruined once gain. One can see how people with petty crimes have to remain in jails for years due to the faulty judicial system whereas the people imprisoned for big crimes like murder, embezzlement, terrorist activities, and corruption get the clean chit within limited time. According to a statement by home ministry, “the total capacity of 1259 jails spread over India is 221,937 while the number of prisoners lodged in is 289,013 and out of those only

72304 are convicted while 216709 are under trails”(My Days in Prison 109). Here, it is fit to mention that Indian jails are overcrowded which is a matter of grave concern where prisoners have to go through many difficulties. According to report, 14,209 prisoners have been squeezed into a jail which has a space for only 6,250. The report also states that between 2009 and 2014, there were 146 deaths due to illness, suicides, accidents or attacks by the fellow inmates and that the ‘prison authorities were not able to ensure safe custody and detention of inmates in jail” (Choudhury xvii).

## **Works Cited**

From, Book Reviews, and T. H. E. Duende Editors. *Book Reviews from the Duende Editors*. 2021, pp. 2–5.

Choudhury, Sunetra. *Behind Bars*. New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2017

Choudhury, Sunetra. *Behind Bars*. New Delhi: Lotus Collection

Int, P. R. *Prison Literature – Part I : The Writer as Prisoner*. 2021, pp. 11–14.

Online, Spenser. *Spenser Review*. 2021, pp. 1–8.