



Prison Literature – A discourse on Incarceration with special focus on Jeffrey Archer’s ‘A Prison Diary’

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Abstract

The fact that is universally acknowledged is that literature is ever emerging. English literature, though began much later when compared to all the other literatures, never lost its lustre. Just as a river strengthens its course by taking in all the minor tributaries, English literature too made itself perennial by absorbing all genres, languages, themes, sub- themes and latest trends.

The topic of discussion for this paper- Prison Literature, is not just any trend. It is a voice to the misunderstood. It is a clarification to the misconceptions surrounding it. It is an oasis to the deserted individuals who spend their life in a hell- hole called ‘prison’- waiting for a verdict.

Guilty or not, the people doomed to ‘prison- life’, suffer their term in desperation, isolation, hopelessness and vulnerability. Jeffrey Archer was one such ill- fated individual who fell prey to the fangs of incarceration. Even after years of his release, the discussion of his innocence is still prevalent.

This paper intends to discuss Jeffrey Archer’s volumes of ‘A Prison Diary’ which act as a tool of discourse in prison literature.

Key Words

Prison, Incarceration, Drugs, Stigma, Depression, Crime.

Introduction

As quoted by Syed Kouser Jabeen, “Prison literature is a literary genre characterised by literature written while the person is confined to a particular place against his or her will.” Every emerging branch of literature represents some section of the society but what makes Prison Literature stand out is that, all the other sections

are sympathised when they voice out their concerns but prisoners are often marked out of the society. They are looked at as individuals with a hardened heart and beasts lurking with no emotions. But what is unheard and unsung is the insensitivity they have to endure, the stigma they are made to wear around their neck like a noose and the tough ordeals which burn down any rock-solid spirit just like lava melts any tough rock.

The narrative chosen for this paper is the series 'A Prison Diary' which comprises three volumes and was written by one of the popular contemporary authors, Jeffrey Archer. The three volumes of the series are named as Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. The titles have a reference of Dante's 'Divine Comedy'.

The three books describe the experiences and journey of Jeffrey Archer in three different categories of Prisons. The writer brings out the miserable conditions of prisons in a well- developed country such as the United Kingdom. He recorded his everyday experiences in the form of diaries which were later published. Archer manages to expose to the world – the hardships of prisoners, their miserable pasts, problem of drugs and many more.

Life In a Prison

Jeffrey Archer was imprisoned for 4 years in different categories of prisons which include Belmarsh (A category, high security prison for murderers, sexual offenders and terrorists), Wayland (C category prison), North Sea Camp (D Category prison, minimum security for petty criminals and prisoners with no previous crime history), Lincolnshire (B Category, high security, only for a brief time), Hollesley Bay (D category, minimum security prison).

The first thing Archer learns about prison is the lack of reliability. He is advised not to discuss his case or appeal with anyone inside the prison by his attorney. He was first kept in a medical wing. This is mandatory for all the prisoners just not to make sure they attempt suicide.

There is a role called 'Listener' in every prison. A listener is one of the inmates who talks to every prisoner and listens to their woes. Listeners are given the privilege of visiting others' cells and they need not stay imprisoned in a room. Here, the listener gives a valuable advice to Archer saying not to share the details about his case lest he should find them in a newspaper the next day.

Archer gives an example of a boy. This highlights how unjust the judicial system is. A minor offence such as shoplifting on the part of a 19-year-old boy could be pardoned with counselling. But the system doomed the boy to solitary confinement for more than eighteen hours a day. He has to stay with hard- core criminals and his entire world is going to change.

If this is the case with first time offenders, lifers have a different story. Lifers often lose hope of ever getting released. They spend more time in prison than they are supposed to due to extended sentences (based on their conduct), ever- lasting trials and judgements that are seldom favourable to them.

Archer also encounters some officers who forcibly strip search him just to prove their authority. A strip- search is a loathsome and humiliating practice in prisons across the world. It degrades a prisoner emotionally.

In the words of Rudrakshi M Mendhe, *“The tag of a criminal is heavy, long-lasting and difficult to erase”*. While at Wayland, Archer comes to know of the recent reforms in prisons which include a change of the motto. Along with the motto, the treatment of prisoners changed. The people outside attached a stigma to the incarcerated individuals, which made the already hard prison life harder. No one understands the tough ordeals one has to go through inside those walls. They are even shunned from the society which takes them away from society and towards crime. The society is not divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It is divided into ‘the ones who are arrested’ and ‘the ones who roam freely’. Everyone is innocent until proven guilty.

Mental Condition of Prisoners

“Often the psychological impact of entering prison for the first time causes deep depression, and that’s when a prisoner sees suicide as the only way out”. (Archer, Volume II, 169)

A prison is not a happy place to be in. It is a symbol of submissiveness, powerlessness and disgrace. It is tough to imagine what a person goes through in that hell hole. Lucky are they who receive love and support from their loved ones from the outside.

Loneliness is one of the biggest punishments and the affection of a loved one is its cure. But prisoners lack the affection one needs and fall into an irretrievable abyss of hopelessness. And time is the thing left in their hands. Being locked up, no sign of solace makes time unbearable for inmates. Jeffery Archer quickly incorporates his old habit – writing, into his routine which keeps him occupied.

Archer’s cellmate makes an observation that sleep is the only time when they aren’t incarcerated. Indeed, it’s the only time when they forget their woes. As described by Keats, “O soft embalmer of the still midnight”, sleep soothes them in a time when they have nothing to feel cheerful about.

In contrast with the public opinion on prisoners as dangerous and vile, most of the convicts have a painful past and commit crimes due to lack of guidance or means. Archer shares one such anguishing account of his fellow inmate, Fletch. He was sexually abused by many Paedophiles (including the people in power in the society) for the entirety of his childhood with no one to rescue him. He was never shown love by anyone. He was left to the dogs once he was of age. With no one to guide him except his trauma, nor the skills to find any work, he had to turn to a life of crime. Akin to him, many of the lifers are victims of abuse and trauma. They are highly misunderstood.

Drugs

The problem of drugs in prison is a serious issue that must be looked into. Many young people are being lured into this trap. The common baits are untreated or unhealed mental health issues, the crappy thoughts of looking cool, the fake belief of ‘drugs heal pain’, bad company and personal temptation.

When young people are caught using or selling drugs, they are put in prison – a place that does never serve as a place of rehabilitation. It only helps in teaching new techniques of using and selling narcotics. The business

of drugs in prison is way lot easier and profitable. Even if they are not interested in drugs, they are forced to continue. Once 'in', there is no way 'out'.

Archer comes to know the different methods of trade used while dealing with drugs while in prison.

"D blockers trade their remotes for drugs. Prison logic." (Archer, Volume II, 262)

No matter how many regulations are imposed, how many measures are taken, how many tests are conducted (like MDT) prisoners always find astounding ways to smuggle drugs. Everything and anything can become an object of trade. Some of the dealers want money to be deposited in their bank accounts directly, some ask for prison favours, some dealers make the addicts clean their spur, some prefer trading phonecards.

The demand and prices of various narcotics differ in prison from the outside world. Heroin is the most on demand. The prisoners say it takes only 24 hours for heroin to flush out of the body whereas Cannabis and Cocaine take a month. So, prisoners who are on heroin drink lots and lots of water after taking the drug. In Belmarsh, the passing of drugs from one spur to another spur took place during the Sunday Church Services.

Every prison conducts a Mandatory Drug Test (MDT) from time to time. Every prisoner is supposed to appear for the test with no exemptions. Prisoners find a way round even with these tests. While at North Sea Camp, an inmate shares his experience and invaluable knowledge on managing a drug test without getting caught. He reveals three ways on how to do it:

- a) The trick of sucking a soap which makes one's urine sample cloudy.
- b) The trick of sucking a copper coin which neutralizes any alcohol content.
- c) A special breathing technique which helps one to blow until the breathalyser shows orange.

A prisoner who is trying to kick off the habit says remorsefully, *"Once you're an addict, you don't need a fix to make you feel good, you need one just so you can return to normal"*. (Archer, Volume III, 320). Jeffrey Archer plans on organising awareness programmes on drug addiction in schools. The prisoner also tells him a pitiful truth - to start with eleven years old as later on children begin to fall in the trap and by fourteen, they turn into incurable addicts approaching dealers for daily fix.

Relationships in Prison

Relationships are usually complicated, when it comes to the relationship of a prisoner with their partner it is complex. Both the partners feel lonely which sometimes make them take extreme steps. While some of the prisoners wait, some resort to homosexuality, unable to curb their urge. Most of the partners on the outside tend to cheat on their partner in prison with friends or acquaintances. This happens in all parts of the world. Especially lifers and prisoners with long sentences experience this issue.

According to Shakespeare, the love that withstands all impediments is true. But in prison, the trials and tribulations for love are endless. Archer mentions the rocky relationship of a prisoner with his wife in which the latter says she will divorce him if he gets into prison again after his release this time. While this issue is sensitive

and difficult to address, it should be noted that if a prisoner finds out that his partner is cheating on him, he sinks into crime more quickly than reforming himself.

If this is the case with hetero-sexual partners, lesbianism and homosexuality in men which appear normal in the outside world, has started to become a matter of concern in prisons. Establishing power and authority over the physically and mentally weak inmates are the primary reasons in these establishments.

Conjugal visits might help prisons maintain a healthy relationship with their partners. That seems unlikely in Britain while countries such as Holland and Spain seem to be sporting the idea positively.

Archer shares the heart – rendering situation of his wife, as quoted by his son, after more than 40 days of his incarceration, *“Mary is holding up well in the circumstances, but he feels that she has probably been most affected by the whole experience”*. (Archer, Volume II, 189)

Incarceration is not just the suffering of the prisoner alone but also of the family. It is heart – breaking to see a loved one rotting in jail. It is even more difficult to hold up when the society around you accuses, blames, stigmatises and ill -treats the prisoner. Most of the families are ripped apart due to such circumstances. Many face bankruptcy due to the ongoing trials. Disappointments, tears, hope, longing become the constant companions of the prisoner as well as the family.

In Jeffrey Archer’s case, a comforting prospect is that he has a doting family, supportive friends, regular visits from his loved ones and tons of letters from his supporters in public.

Education and Other Activities

The activities and programmes offered in A, B, C and D category prisons were different. Archer, in his books, explains the different activities in prison which help the prisoners earn money- Workshops, Education, Pottery etc.

In Belmarsh, Archer enrolls for Education. He had to give a test before starting on it. But the standard of the test is not even high school level. He is asked to take up some creative writing classes for the enrolled inmates which gave great results.

He is made to work in a workshop where the inmates are assigned the mundane task of dropping tea bags, jam and sugar into bigger bags and containers.

In Wayland, he signs up for pottery, in which for most of the part, he remains unsuccessful.

In North Sea Camp, his duties and prison activities differed. He was first given the job in a unit called SMU, later he took up the duties as a hospital orderly. Activities in a D category prison are way less when compared to a C category prison.

However, in Hollesley Bay, he took up duties as the library orderly which gave him ample time to edit the Volume Two of this series and embark on a new collection of short stories.

The matter of concern in all the prisons is that, Education is the least paid of all the activities. The prisoners are paid more for pottery and mind- numbing tasks such as tea bag filling. So, the prisoners are naturally inclined towards workshops rather than education. But, on the bright side, there are many talented prisoners in every prison who are passionate about reading, writing and getting a degree.

There are other activities like Association, Gym, Sunday Sabbath etc. which only harbour in more crime rate.

Thus, Jeffrey Archer's 'Prison Diary' series is a comprehensive and authentic account of the lives of the ill-fated prisoners.

Prisoners are different people inside, irrespective of their crimes. Some may be remorseful of their crime and some may own that like an achievement. But at the end of the day, their ordeal and their suffering prove that they truly are misunderstood, unfortunate and lonely people. Hence, a thorough exploration and research into the prison literature will help in bringing the true stories of lives behind the bars into light and change the perception of the society towards the prisoners.

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