

Conditions and Limits of the Autobiographical Self in Joya Mitra's Prison Memoir *Killing Days*

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Abstract: As a genre, prison writing has often been analyzed as a subcategory of the larger umbrella term we call “life narratives”. In my paper, I look at Joya Mitra's *Hanyaman*(1989), translated by Shampa Banerjee as *Killing Days* and examine the conditions and limits of the autobiographical self emerging in the prison memoir by situating it within the intersections of two paradigms- the role of the prison in the 'institutionalized killing of the subject' and theories about different genres of life-writing like autobiographies, testimonies and others.

Keywords: prison-writing, life-writing, bender, autobiography, penitentiary

There is no future, and no present either. There are no seasons here, no changing patterns of joy and sorrow, good and evil. The human community that collectively thinks, eats, sleeps and works here exists in only one time- the past. And the past is always intimately personal.

- Joya Mitra, *Killing Days*, (37)

In Georges Gusdorf's seminal article titled “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, he talks about how ‘the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space’ (29). This is a reference to how, this genre has not always existed everywhere and can not be found outside one

cultural area and ‘one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures’ (29). He further clarifies that the ‘conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life’ which an autobiography presupposes is the late product of a specific civilization thereby proposing that the notion of a bounded self presupposed in autobiographies is a purposeful and culturally specific construct. Though post-structuralism has long since made suspect the idea of the sovereign subject and deconstructed much of the coherence and self-knowledge upon which it is based, the question of the sovereign, autonomous self takes on a different import and meaning in the context of the prison writing. As a genre, prison writing has always occupied a contested space within the larger umbrella category called life writing. In this paper, I hope to present an analysis of one such work of prison writing, written in a language other than English. I will look at the ‘prison memoir’ form through *Hanyaman*(1989), written by Joya Mitra in Bengali and translated by Shampa Banerjee as *Killing Days*. I aim to closely examine the construction of an autobiographical self by a female prisoner through an analysis of her ‘life-narrative’ written during the postcolonial milieu of 1970’s Bengal.

In the context of prison and prison writing, Georges Gusdorf’s argument needs to be further supplemented by looking at thinkers like Bender. John Bender in *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* argued that Gusdorf’s idea of a coherent bounded self which is also malleable and a personality that can transform through a series of events was crucial for prison reformers and shaped the modern penal institutional logic. He argued that ‘penitentiaries assumed novelistic ideas of character ... to reconstruct the fictions of personal identity that underline consciousness’ (2). Thus, in English prisons beginning in the 1780s, ‘each convict would be assigned upon entering one of the new penitentiaries to live out a program or scenario,’ and ‘different stages of the sentence’ were separated out ‘like the stages of a classic plot’ (23). Once a prisoner had been incorporated as a character-type into an existing plot, ‘providence’ would ensure that the known conclusion of the fictional narrative would transpire in the real life of the prisoner, too. He is referring to the criminality-change-citizenship trajectory, the process through which the prison tries to rewrite the ‘social deviant’ as the ‘penitent citizen’ (23). My aim with this paper would be to analyze the conditions and limits of the autobiographical self emerging in *Killing Days* by situating it within the intersections of these two paradigms- the ‘institutionalized killing of the subject’ (Rodriguez 85) in prisons and theories about the genre of life-writing.

To be a prisoner is a process of being variously written about and fixed through narratives. Thus any mode of autobiographical writing is viewed by many scholars as inherently emancipatory. Judith Scheffler, the editor of *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings*(2002) argues that the writing of autobiographical accounts, provide a way of regaining control by allowing the incarcerated self to ‘order reality according to one’s

own perceptions and organizing principles' through writing(xxxv). The self Scheffler alludes to however cannot exist freely apart from the coercive environment that marks most prisons. Even the use of the term 'prison writing' instead of 'prisoner's writing' highlights the ways in which the prison regulates how the prisoner writes. Mitra's *Killing Days* explores the power of 'official writing' in the everyday lives of prisoners, not just their arrest. The first few pages of the memoir are filled with the narrator-subject's confusion regarding her circumstances- carried on a stretcher she cannot remember whether she is in a police station, hospital or the little town jail. The narrative action as such begins with the sound of her identity being fixed in the official record: "Write down! 21/9, first transfer of the day' I remember in a flash, it's my birthday, the beginning of my 21st year'(4).

'Official Writing' poses a continuous threat and can engineer further displacements within the prison ecosystem. The subject-narrator for example talks about how 'a little piece of official paper' is enough to ensure that the prisoner gets transferred to a different facility at any time(15). It orchestrates the separation of another inmate Jalamani and her son, the news of which she receives via a piece of paper that she cannot read : 'But Jalamani doesn't understand any of it. Bijay has grown up? Of course he has. It's been three years since the case opened. He can't live here? He'll go to an orphanage? Why? He's not an orphan!' (29). The memoir highlights how the orders that organize such a separation can't however ensure accountability via a paper trail, for when Jalamani is released she is left searching for the 'the authorities andask[s] them the address of the orphanage where children who have mothers are sent?' (30). 'Official writing' is laid out as the regulatory presence in the lives of every prisoner. The specter of the 'ticket', 'case table' and 'marks' hangs over their lives and dictates not only the ways in which they are written about but also the only official ways in which they can 'write' themselves.

Every morning, lying in bed I watch the day's new women prisoners coming into the hospital. The doctor checks their height, weight and identifying marks on a big card and signs it. That's what they call a 'ticket' here. Before this, the prisoners are taken to the Jailor to be entered into a log and be informed of their length of stay and reasons for incarceration. This is called 'case table'....Sometimes I get into trouble with the jargon here. (6)

The 'modernist' Enlightenment prison, an 18th century invention, was the deliberate architectural expression of an idea - punishment through rehabilitation in temporal isolation. Practices like solitary confinement for example were based on a belief in an autonomous self. With the removal of 'bad influences', inmates were expected to draw on their interiority and employ their agency in the service of reform. Prison practices described in the memoir reflect how rehabilitation ideals inform day to day functionings within the prison as well. Like how prisoners may earn money during their jail term through labour and which is then 'kept for the

day the prisoner is free again, so that it can be of use in her rehabilitation. At that point, because '*she is happy*', the erstwhile prisoner is supposed to part with some of the money in a strictly predetermined way' (48, emphasis added). The marks system is another manifestation of this ideological imperative which imposed the rehabilitation ideal on the lives of prisoners who were expected to mark their journey within the jail along the teleology of crime and punishment (and, potentially, redemption).

"Marks" are a magic wand in the hands of the jail authorities. When it is waved at them, the convicts quietly obey all orders. The courts may sentence somebody to a number of years in prison but the jail authorities have the power to commute the sentence on the *basis of good conduct*. This process of reducing the sentence is commonly described as a system of giving or taking away "marks". (17-18 emphasis added).

Life-narratives do not have the authority to define the kind of judicial, evidentiary truth that is established in a courtroom, or counter reform measures imposed through measures discussed above; but they provide a kind of personal/alternative truth that can contest the official, legal record in the public forum of an expectant readership. Along with this, a counter-narrative can also provide a more complete account of a prisoner's life that explains or even justifies his or her involvement in crime. But the narrator-subject of *Killing Days* reveals very little about her pre-prison life or post prison years, the pages of the memoir are instead filled with short, self contained narratives of the lives of other women.

Their 'crimes' are narrativised, often revealing what Michel Foucault calls the 'carceral continuum' because social norms, glances, gestures, taunts, official exclusions goad women, especially unlettered, poor and tribal women toward criminality and ultimately into the prison (56). Foucault writes that the prison 'continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline' (302-303). The autobiographical self in *Killing Days* delineates how female, uneducated, impoverished, mentally ill and tribal women are already marked as 'deviant' in large part because of the intersections of gender, tribe and class. Through this, I think the memoir functions as a counter-narrative that directly critiques the ideal imposed by prison reform.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in *Reading Autobiography* that prison narratives enable 'prisoners to inscribe themselves as fully human in the midst of a system designed to dehumanize them and to render them anonymous and passive' (201). But Joya Mitra's memoir does more than humanise and memorialise fellow female prisoners. Through the narrativization of their lives, the narrator-subject points out that the 'prisoners' are already marked as a 'criminal underclass'. The narrative ends up describing how the prison reform model ostensibly attempts to transform the criminal into a model citizen, but a majority of the female prisoners were

already marked as deviant, as un-citizens by the civil society way before they were officially marked as criminals by the law. This comes through most apparently in the case of Jamini and Baroda-Ma. The narrator-subject describes how Jamini was arrested and sent to jail for 20 years for murder. The narrator is witness to her bout of insanity in the prison during which she physically harms her own child. Within months the 'Supreme Court rescinds Jamini's sentence on the basis of her mental state, *but because she is insane, she has to remain in prison forever*. Who will post bail for her and take her home?' (22, emphasis added). Similarly the narrative describes how Baroda-Ma pleaded guilty for the murder of a predatory moneylender that her son committed. However, while describing her arrest the autobiographical self writes about how the judge convicted 'sixty-year-old illiterate Hindu female Barodadasi' of wilful murder and sentenced her to twenty years rigorous punishment' in spite of significant doubts regarding the truth of her claims (36). The narrator hints that the judge did not find any similarity between Baroda's wrinkled face and the face of Madonna. This along with the reference to her illiteracy reveal how Barodadasi was already marked as an unnecessary citizen and a woman. The prison as a mechanism of rewriting can not erase such markers of 'double deviance' that inscribe most of the female prisoners described in these pages. 'Double' deviance is a reference to how female prisoners are viewed as breaking both gender roles and the criminal law.

The subject-narrator of *Killing Days* thus uses the prison memoir as a traditionally accepted counter narrative in the sense that it provides a kind of personal truth for the lives of fellow prisoners that can contest the official, legal record. I have argued however that the narrative ends up countering more than 'official writing' by presenting an alternative truth. It also provides a critique of the Enlightenment ideal that underlies the rehabilitative ideal of prison reforms by pointing out the 'carceral continuum' and 'double deviance' that already mark female prisoners. *Killing Days* re-configures the function of a counter narrative by questioning the accepted teleology of reform- the movement from a 'social deviant' to 'penitent citizen'.

But what about the autobiographical self? Interestingly no attempt is made to employ this narrative to offer an alternate or fuller account of her own 'crime'. On the basis of this choice that the subject-narrator makes to not talk about her pre-prison experiences or provide an alternate account for the 'crime' for which she is in custody; one could say that the autobiographical self takes on the role of a witness. This raises the question, can this prison memoir then be read as a testimonio?

The term testimonio is used in Latin American Cultural and Literary Studies. The concept of testimonio is developed by, among others, George Yúdice, John Beverly and Pierce Armstrong. Yúdice explains the term as:

Testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.).

Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. (Yúdice, 17).

Sharmila Rege in her work *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* reads dalit life narratives as testimonios, 'which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance' (23). She sees these life narratives as a challenge to the bourgeois genre of autobiography 'as they represent not the journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness but rather a social and community-based chorus of voices'(27). *Killing Days* however I would argue does not function as a testimonio. Firstly, in prison writing, such acts of witnessing have its ethical and methodological problems. It can easily slip into voyeurism, or it can produce a power differential between the witnessing writer and the witnessed prisoner.

Joya Mitra's memoir too may unwittingly repeat the biographical project of the legal and penal systems that produce official narratives (such as criminal records, files, and case-studies) about their prisoner subjects with little if any input from those about whom they write often overwriting the complexities of prisoners' stories while highlighting the complexity of the author-narrator's subjectivity. Thus, in this segment I will argue that while the subject-narrator sometimes behaves in the capacity of a witness to the events unfolding in the narrative, she is also configured as a skillful agential force negotiating her powers as the literate subject and witnessing writer. There is a mention of how she 'had written slogans on the walls of the ward by rubbing fresh leaves on the white surface.' However the Head Warder later came with buckets of white wash to clean the walls and told her 'Why do you do these things?...Our jobs will be in danger and *who in this ward can read and understand what you write?* Why do you write all this' (14, *emphasis added*).

Literacy doesn't just mark her out as a witnessing writer, it also marks her out as a citizen of the 'free society' and 'lettered city'. Here I am referring to the book *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* by Joseph Slaughter where he argues that 'with its discursive, idealized alignment with modernity, democracy, and liberty becomes the primary qualification and capacity for participation in . . . a free society—a society that writes about itself *as a ..lettered city*' (279). I would argue that this is the reason why agency isn't deployed in the narrative through the force of literacy. In fact, early on when the subject-author wishes to complain to the Jailor, he 'cautions (her) against too much excitement...(and) offers some books' advising her to stick to her reading 'to the exclusion of everything else' (13). At other times, she comments on how the books in the prison libraries are all 'neutral religious books' (46) she has no interest in reading. She instead frames her individual agency in the narrative through her multiple rebellious acts, like the hunger strike, or mobilizing fellow prisoners or protesting against the matron.

I would also argue that the narrator-subject's agency is deployed in consciously not representing some of the other prisoners as 'others'. For example, the instance with Jamini's which I quoted in the first segment. In that instance, there was a possibility for the memoir to construct a fundamental distinction between the prisoner as the rational being and the other prisoner as an impulsive animal. The narrative however, does not reproduce the vocabulary of total difference between the otherworldliness of the prison and the comparative normality of civil society that she belongs to, even within the prison walls. The whole incident surrounding Jamini dashing her own child's head to the floor is framed by the narrator's commentary:

In the 40 minutes that elapse before the door is opened, Jamini ...dashes the child's head to the floor. If ever there is a fire in the ward, it will take about the same amount of time to reduce it to cinders....By now, having finally finished his dinner, the Jailor comes to the ward looking anxious..The doctor comes and prescribes a sedative for Jamini...Matron goes with a syringe to the verandah in front of the cell, but quickly retreats....I ask the doctor whether he will allow me to give her the injection....I don't think I will ever forget that moment. It was one of those times when I did something so stupidAfter I gave her the sedative, Jamini went and perched on the cell door once more. I came out and pulled the door shut. I still don't remember clearly, but was I in too much of a hurry? The heavy door shut with a jolt and Jamini's forehead knocked against the iron grill. And Jamini, the terrifying spectre of just half an hour ago, gave me a strange, sad smile and said, "You hurt my head?". (19-21)

Here I propose that the mention of a 'fire in the ward' and the accompanying delay in action on the part of the prison authorities is deliberately employed by the narrative to de-construct any opposition that might emerge between the mentally sane, self contained and charitable narrator-subject and the violent subjectivity of this fellow prisoner. Jamini's actions aren't staged as instinctive and involuntary violence. She isn't just humanised, but she is also presented as subject to the same kind of criminal negligence that would affect all the prisoners in case something like a fire broke out.

Sometimes however, the subject-narrator has also describes the larger collective of incarcerated mentally ill patients who populate the madhouse:

Cages large enough to hold tigers and lions in a zoo.....Rice and vegetables don't come in plates to this cage, they are thrown on the floor inside and the inmates must scramble for them...They are just naked bodies here, their bones jutting out under the filthy skin. If they are given anything to wear, what if they use the cloth to hang themselves? (109)

The vocabulary used here can be described as grotesque and dehumanising. I would argue that it has the effect of 'corrupting' the official discourse. Genet writes in the introduction to another

work of prison writing that ‘the prisoner must use the very language, the words, the syntax of his enemy. . . . He has only one recourse: to accept this language but to corrupt it . . . skilfully’ (22, emphasis added). Here and in many other instances, the narrator-subject uses the ‘syntax of the enemy’ in expressions of subversion, defiance, and resistance. In this case for example, the grotesque (naked bodies, bones jutting out under the filthy skin) is a direct result of the absurdity of the warden’s logic, repurposed as a rhetorical question, that if they are given anything to wear, what if they use the cloth to hang themselves?

While the autobiographical self in *Killing Days* does act as a witness at times, receding from the narrative action of her own life-writing; in a prison memoir such an act of witnessing must ensure that the power differential between the witnessing writer and the witnessed prisoner does not recreate the hierarchy of official writing and life writing. Here I have argued that the description of mentally ill patients and literacy can be read as choices made by an agential subject-narrator that negotiates the dynamics of being the witnessing writer and the literate prisoner. This describes a negative deployment of agency, the limits on the autobiographical self. To conclude, one needs to also look at the role of memory, language and time in the construction of the autobiographical self.

Central to most autobiographical writing, starting with the *Confessions of St. Augustine* is the sense of a dual self which is temporally displaced, marking a distinction between the past self, which I will refer to henceforth as the ‘experiencing self’; and a later present one (that is, present at the time of writing), which I will refer to as the ‘authorial self’. This sense of a ‘then’ and ‘now’ which is crucial for life writing, isn’t marked in any distinct kind of way in the narrative especially in the Bengali text. In the English translation, this distinction is marked more clearly, something that Shampa Banerjee has also commented on in her Translator’s Note: ‘Joya’s prose brings the past into the present, to the here and now. The Bengali language accommodates that leap forward in time with great felicity’ (xvi). The narrator-subject’s skillful employment of this shift allows her to make several choices.

Sometimes the ‘authorial self’ acts as an all knowing, omnipotent narrator whose awareness is added to the narrative as a supplement to the immediacy of feelings captured by the ‘experiencing self’. For example, on her first day in Presidency Jail, she describes the buildings: ‘On either side of the courtyard are large enough rooms that are mostly dark...The upper floor has no windows, only a wall with small openings between bricks. *I was unaware then that for the next two years and more*, those little holes would become my windows to the world’ (75, emphasis added). The narrator-subject can make such a choice because the narration of her entire time in prison in a linear fashion is not the central objective of this memoir. Within the first few pages, she writes ‘this is not nostalgia. It’s more like turning the pages of an album’ (4). So some pages are turned in random, some instances are mentioned in passing, some are commented upon by an all knowing ‘authorial self’ and some described in great detail.

Sometimes the ‘authorial self’ is invoked to compound the immediacy of feeling: ‘Even today an overwhelming sense of futility clutches at my throat, choking me, when I see the sophisticated, the cultured, the civilized, enclosed in their cocoon of security, displaying the same emotions towards the insane- laughter, ridicule and repulsion’ (111). In a few striking instances though, this distinction completely collapses. For example:

People who haven’t witnessed the naked mad women of the female ward of Presidency jail won’t know most of the time that the two femur bones that come down the thighs from the wide pelvic bone in a woman’s body, have about eight inches of space between them. They won’t know how completely denuded of flesh a starving body can be (111).

The narrative depicts both the failure of representation, while simultaneously invoking the kind of framing used by photographs that have the power to shock and disturb an intended readership. This is opposed to descriptions of scenes witnessed by the narrator-subject while being transported from one jail to another : ‘A man stands with a dark little boy his head shaved, a coloured thread round his waist, digging into the mud on the riverbank. The picture is still sharp in my mind, framed in twilight’ (16). In many instances in the memoir however, especially when the narrator-subject is describing her solitary confinement, the language is stripped of literary devices and becomes merely descriptive. The autobiographical self does not use a better metaphor for being locked up in a tiny cell since she is already locked up in a tiny concrete cell.

In conclusion, I began this paper with Gusdorf’s idea of the bounded self and in the epigraph, as well as in many other instances, the narrator-subject says that ‘memories...freeze into stasis here (in prison)’ (37). Hence my final argument would be that the autobiographical self emerging in *Killing Days* isn’t just the dual self temporally displaced, traditionally found in many autobiographies and fictional works. It is the temporally disintegrated autobiographical self of the prison memoir, flitting between a past that is indefinitely stuck in a static space and a future that provides commentary without temporal mobility. The autobiographical self in *Killing Days* bears witness and counters the rehabilitative ideal while simultaneously presenting the failures of language and representation and the process of the erosion and disintegration of the bounded self presupposed by autobiographical acts.

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