

Decoding the Rhetoric of Resistance in Barindra Ghose's Prison Memoir *The Tale of My Exile*

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Abstract: Resistance to oppression is critical to the progressive transformation of any unjust sociopolitical setup. Throughout human history, resistance to hegemonic powers has taken various forms and dimensions, such as revolutionary political and social organizations, acts and movements of civil disobedience, militant rebellions, and discursive resistance. Among these, discursive resistance, or the contestation of dominant narratives and value systems that undergird the rule of oppression, is a less conspicuous yet potent weapon of opposition. The aim of the present paper is to identify the rhetoric of resistance in one such oppositional text, Barindra Kumar Ghose's prison memoir, *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve years in the Andamans* (1922). Employing a qualitative methodology of close reading of the selected primary text, the paper decodes various literary strategies employed by the writer to delineate his experience of incarceration in the service of a political counter-narrative to the official discourse. These rhetorical tools are not just aesthetic embellishments, but function to spotlight key dimensions of colonial imprisonment, which are strategically represented for the purpose of counter-hegemonic advocacy. Thus, this study demonstrates that autobiographical storytelling employs language and narrative tools for particular discursive interests. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that locates literary and cultural texts as significant sites of cultural and political resistance.

Keywords: Colonialism, Memoir, Metaphor, Prison, Resistance, Rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

Resistance to oppression is critical to the progressive transformation of any unjust sociopolitical setup. Throughout human history, resistance to hegemonic powers has taken various forms and dimensions, such as revolutionary political and social organizations, acts and movements of civil disobedience, militant rebellions, and discursive resistance. Among these, discursive resistance, or the contestation of dominant narratives and value systems that undergird the rule of oppression, is a less conspicuous yet potent weapon of opposition. This ideological and cultural critique, often encoded in the texts and cultural productions of marginalized communities, is a site of subversive politics and of narrative reclamation. Underscoring the political significance of "the language skills of rhetoric," Barbara Harlow asserts, "Culture, then, and language are critical as an arena of struggle, no less than as a part of that struggle, as one of the weapons ... The use of language is crucial, both as challenge to the antagonist and in redefining the identity of the protagonist, to the strategy of any resistance movement" (Harlow, 1987, p.55). The textual rendition of the history and experiential reality of the disempowered is a powerful undermining of the political-cultural erasure and silencing imposed by the repressive regime.

One such textual rendition of acute persecution by a discriminating state is Barindra Kumar Ghose's political prison memoir, *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve Years in the Andamans* (1922). Situated in the context of British colonial rule and exploitation of India and the ensuing freedom struggle movement, Ghose's memoir chronicles his experiences as a political prisoner in the penal colony of the Andaman Islands. The aim of the present paper is to identify the rhetoric of resistance in Ghose's prison memoir, locating various literary strategies employed by the writer to delineate his experience of incarceration in the service of a political counter-narrative. These rhetorical tools are not just aesthetic embellishments, but function to spotlight key dimensions of colonial imprisonment, which are strategically represented for the purpose of counter-hegemonic advocacy. In this way this study demonstrates that autobiographical storytelling employs language and narrative tools for particular discursive interests. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that locates literary and cultural texts as significant sites of cultural and political resistance.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prison literature, particularly political prison writing, is a burgeoning field of academic research. Investigations into the nature of carceral institutions and

dimensions of imprisoned subjectivities have revealed previously unknown facets of this relatively obscure realm of human existence. Landmark studies in this field include *Writers in Prison* (1990) by Ioan Davies, *Imagination in Confinement: Women's Writings from French Prisons* (1983) by Elissa D. Gelfand, *Prison Writing in India* (2014) by C. N. Srinath, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (2003) by Joy James, and *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1989) by H. Bruce Franklin. However, while undeniably enlightening works of scholarship, the main thrust of most of these texts is in the domain of socio-political investigation. Given the peculiarity of imprisonment as a mode of living and its distinctiveness as a space of powerlessness sanctioned by society and state authority, critical studies of prison writing focus (with good reason) on the sociological import and power dimensions embedded in prison discourse. However, this critical orientation results in a gap in prison studies vis-à-vis the consideration of prison writings as *literary* texts in their own right. Prison literature needs to be assessed from a multifocal lens that gives due attention and credence to its rhetorical and political significance. This paper aims to address the aforementioned gap by examining the integration of the poetics of autobiographical storytelling and the politics of resistance in the selected primary text. Analyzing the stylistic dimensions of the selected prison self-narrative and relating it to the politics of its author-protagonist is an underused critical approach that would serve to highlight the aesthetics of resistance in prison discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a literary research employing a qualitative methodology of analysis. It undertakes a close reading of the primary text, *The Tale of My Exile*, identifying the literary devices and rhetorical practices employed by the author for his autobiographical project. The study combines this textual analysis with secondary readings that provide much-needed perspectives on the historical and political context of Barindra Ghosh's detention as well as the larger framework of prison discourse. Ultimately, the research makes use of and contributes to the scholarship in the domains of Life Writing, Prison Literature and Resistance Studies by focalizing on the complexities of the selected prison memoir's politics of representation.

DISCUSSION

As a genre, the autobiographical mode is ostensibly distinct from other 'imaginative' narrative forms such as the novel and short story by the 'truth' of its first-hand lived experience. However, this premise of referentiality does not imply a mere transcription of the 'facts' of an autobiographical subject's life. Like other genres, autobiographical accounts involve a carefully mediated process of selection, narrative organization, and employment of literary devices to curate a particular version of the autobiographical journey for public consumption. Prison autobiography is also an act of self-representation that employs literary storytelling and self-experience to reveal various dimensions of (often-silenced) imprisoned subjectivity. For political prisoners, this literary mode acquires particular counterdiscursive significance given the cause and nature of their incarceration. Strategically confined to the realm of voicelessness,

invisibility, and vulnerability that typifies imprisonment, political detainees nonetheless seek to regain agency through the articulation and textualisation of their prison experience. Paul Gready attests to this contestatory function of prison autobiographical writing, "To be a prisoner is to be variously written, to be contested through writing. Nevertheless, autobiography chiefly served to restore elemental political ground to the prisoner and can be seen as the most sophisticated articulation of the oppositional 'power of writing'" (Gready, 1993, p.493).

For political prisoners, then, autobiographical storytelling is critically instrumental in the politics of resistance. Their prison memoirs are consciously designed through rhetorical tools, narrative choices, and stylistic devices to foreground and condemn state repression as well as to garner sympathy and support for counter-hegemonic resistance. *The Tale of My Exile* by Barindra Kumar Ghose is one such colonial prison memoir. Ghose (1880-1959) was a noted revolutionary who opposed British colonialism in India and espoused a radical nationalist ideology of forceful deposition of colonial rule in the absence of more moderate channels. He remains known in the annals of the Indian national freedom movement because of his popular weekly political editorial magazine *Jugantar* and his conviction in the Manicktolla Bomb Conspiracy. Charged with "waging war against the King" along with fellow *Jugantar* revolutionaries, Ghosh was condemned to imprisonment in the Cellular Jail in the penal colony of the Andamans (Sri Aurobindo Institute of Culture, n.d.). Ghose's memoir, *The Tale of My Exile*, is an enlightening and compellingly written account of his experience of colonial incarceration that demands critical interrogation vis-à-vis its aesthetics of resistance.

A conspicuous aspect of the poetics of the memoir is its frequent use of natural metaphors and imagery and its skillful relation to prison conditions. In the very beginning of the text, Ghose employs natural scenery, providing a detailed description of the refreshing beauty of the natural vista discernable from his Alipore prison cell while awaiting extradition to the Andaman Cellular Jail. He writes, "As for natural scenery there was the captivating little bit of blue sky, the soothing yellow and sun-lit tops of a few mango, jack, *aswattha* and *peepool* trees peering over the walls 14 cubit high and the free wanderings of birds and their unrestrained chirpings. We did not see green grass and blossoming flowers and things like them for seven months" (Ghose, 1922, p.4). The beauty and vitality of the natural vista and its accompanying flora and fauna are strategically delineated to reinforce the inside-outside dichotomy of prison existence. Words such as "captivating," "free wanderings," and "unrestrained chirpings" foreground the stark contrast between the captive and diminished life of prisoners like him and the liberated state of natural life outside the prison. Additionally, Ghose uses this present therapeutic immediacy of nature to contrast and foreshadow the utter sterility and void of his forthcoming life in the Cellular Jail, where he was completely cut off from the outside and natural world.

Furthermore, Ghose employs vivid imagery to present the picturesque view of the Andamans at first sight from their approaching ship. He describes, "We were taken to the deck at eleven. The infinite expanse of the unknown

had then been drawn in and showed on either side a magic creation of nature's woodland beauty. What beauty the Earth offered, with the hills and forests as her locks and tresses! How could cruel fetters be associated with something so beautiful? Yet, this anomaly did indeed stand incarnate in the Andamans, this fowler's trap set there to catch men" (Ghose, 1922, p.16). Ghose presents the utter beauty and terror of this mighty landscape, personifying the island's majestic hills and forests as the beautiful locks and tresses of the Earth. The natural metaphor here underlines the striking paradox of an awe-inspiring beautiful terrain being the backdrop of such a life-negating setup as the Cellular Jail. Ghose also uses the analogy of the fowler's trap that entices animals but actually entails their entrapment to represent the deceptive alluring nature of the Andaman Islands, which actually function as sites of captivity.

Metaphors of animality recur in the text, underscoring the dehumanizing milieu of imprisonment. Satirizing the hunter-prey dynamics of the colonial prison, Ghose remarks, "The goat does not fear the tiger as much as the prisoners feared this king of the Black Waters" (Ghose, 1922, p.44). This "king" or supreme master of the Cellular Jail referred here was the British Jail Superintendent Mr. Barry, who was imbued with predatory traits and cultivated a culture of fear, intimidation, and victimization of the vulnerable prisoners. Ghose highlights the essential inhumanity of the penal colony by renaming it the "Cellular Zoo," which cages the convicts in an animalistic manner. He recounts their humiliation using zoological imagery, referring to when Mr. Barry would bring his family for recreational visits to this "Cellular Zoo" and he and other inmates were displayed as "queer animals." "He used to bring them with him now and then and show them over the Cellular Zoo with all the queer animals like us that were in it... We only knew the shame of it all!" (Ghose, 1922, p.64). Emphasizing the animalistic treatment handed out by the colonial regime, he remarks elsewhere, "We were dreaded more than a pack of wild wolves" (49).

Likewise, Ghose recounts the dehumanizing prison practice that required a "neck-ticket" permanently bound to each detainee. Prisoners are divested of their names (or any other marker of personal identity) upon entering the colonial prison, symbolizing the regime's strategic denial of the prisoner's fundamental markers of humanity. Reinforcing this subhuman treatment is the "neck-ticket" containing a penally assigned number and their 'criminal' record that Ghose says remained, "suspended from our necks what may be compared to the bell of a bullock" (Ghose, 1922, p.48). The usage of such animalistic references by the writer is instrumental in his political agenda of bringing to light the brutality of political incarceration in mainstream discourse in India.

Another significant mode of metaphorical signification in the selected prison memoir is the deployment of classic epic traditions and mythological allusions to represent political imprisonment within a framework of cultural dignity and moral legitimacy. Myths and epic tales have been an essential part of the cultural fabric of India since time immemorial. They symbolize civilizational unity, a shared history and identity, and the sanctity of the subcontinent's core belief system. Priyesh Kumar Jha

highlights this discursive role played by myths in India's political history:

Historically, myths have acted as reservoirs of inspiration during critical junctures, including the Indian independence movement. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi employed the allegory of the *Bhagavad Gita* to frame the struggle against colonial rule as a dharmic battle, resonating with the populace's spiritual and ethical sensibilities. This mythological framework imbued nationalist discourse with profound moral authority, linking political resistance to spiritual duty. (Jha, 2024, pp.72-73)

Barindra Ghose too employs mythological rhetoric along with parallelism, harnessing the canonicity of the myths for consequentiality as well as affective sympathy. For instance, he refers to the Hindu female deity Radha, who symbolizes devotion, and compares her plaintive loneliness upon separation from Krishna to his (and other detainees) own solitary confinement in Alipore Jail. Bereft of company and with a desire to share his current suffering like Radha, he remembers, "Sometimes perhaps a voice in our inmost being hummed almost inaudibly in the plaintive words of Radha, "Dear sister, to whom, alas! shall I tell my tale of sorrow?" (Ghose, 1922, p.47).

Significantly, Ghose recasts his and his fellow political detainees' experience of penal deportation to the Andaman Islands as a banishment narrative comparable to that of the legendary Sri Ram Chandra in the ancient epic *Ramayana*. He claims:

We were banished, even as Sri Ram Chandra, with the advantage that we had no faithful Sita Devi to cook our food. Neither did we have a docile and devoted brother like Lakshman, nor an army of monkey-friends to secure us ripe plantains. Besides, Sri Ram Chandra was punished only with simple deportation, whereas we were to undergo rigorous imprisonment. Therefore, if the sheer weight of punishment was taken into consideration, we should stand as far bigger avatars than Ram Chandra. (Ghose, 1922, p.43)

Not only does the memoir invoke the paradigm of Sri Rama's unjust exile from his homeland of Ayodhya to refer to the detainees' eviction to the penal colony but also places their struggle on an even greater degree due to the absence of ameliorating figures like Lakshman and Sita Devi and the addition of the suffering of rigorous hard labour.

In another instance, Ghose cites both the major Hindu epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to refer to the divine protection of modesty accorded to female deities Sita and Draupadi amidst situations of unjust disgrace. In contrast, he highlights their pitiable state of under-clothed humiliation in a colonial prison regime that accords them no consideration of dignity, such as propriety and proper clothing.

Out of shame, I began to pray, "Mother-Earth, hast thou forgotten that gesture of thine in the Treta Yuga? Cleave thyself once more, that I may hide my shame-stricken face. I am not indeed the daughter of king Janaka but my

modesty is no less imperious than hers.” But the Mother did not open her bosom and we proceeded in that state to take our bath... Thus, when we had to change our clothes, we were in as helpless a condition as Draupadi was in the assembly of the Kauravas. (Ghose, 1922, p.45)

By employing mythological paralleling, Ghose manages to redefine and reclaim the detainee’s identity from a narrative of criminality and subjection to that of a legendary representative struggle between good and evil.

Central to the memoir’s rhetorical agenda is the use of irony, paradox, hyperbole, and pathos to foreground the unjustness, deception, and suffering of penal oppression. These literary devices present in stark and impactful terms the wretchedness of incarceration and expose the degrading and repressive ethos of colonial subjugation. In the initial pages of the memoir, Ghose uses the oxymoronic phrase, “to be buried alive in the Andamans” (Ghose, 1922, p.3) to refer to the living death that characterizes the reality of banishment-cum-incarceration in the penal colony. A life condemned to eternal isolation from one’s near and dear ones, fellow countrymen, and sometimes even the most ordinary human company; entailing complete subjection to a callous power, arduous slave labor, and abysmal living conditions is comparable to being alive only in name and hence is fittingly represented through the aforementioned oxymoron. Similarly, the reference to “Hope Town” (Ghose, 1922, p.27), a prison camp at the penal island, underscores the irony of its nomenclature vis-à-vis the actual reality of desolation and hardship faced by its captive inhabitants. In another incident, accentuating the pathos of their plight of abject deprivation of basic needs and simple joys, Ghose recounts his utter delight at having once sneakily acquired the “dainty dish” of ordinary roti laced with sugar and coconut oil. Employing the hyperbole of starvation as a state of optimum flavoring, he remarks, “Hunger is the best sauce-that is a simple truth that is always true” (Ghose, 1922, p.137). By using such literary devices, the memoir engages the affective sympathy of the readership and exposes the unseen inhuman practices of the colonial regime for public scrutiny.

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates the complex interconnections between the poetics and politics of resistance in Barindra Ghose’s *The Tale of My Exile*. Political detainees like Ghose employed autobiographical storytelling and various rhetorical practices to fashion a counter-narrative to mainstream colonial discourse. In the selected memoir, to use Arnold’s remarks for a different prison narrative but equally relevant here, “Prison exemplifies the callous brutality of the colonial regime as well as the defiant suffering of India’s imprisoned youth” (Arnold, 2004 p.41). This counter-hegemonic representation is undertaken through the skillful use of stylistic tools like natural and animal imagery, mythological allusion as well as literary devices like irony, oxymoron, pathos and hyperbole. In its conclusive analysis, the paper locates Ghose’s prison memoir as a literary text that serves as a key site of cultural and political resistance.

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