

## **On Surviving the Doomed Space: A Study of Two Select Malayalam Prison Narratives**

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### *Abstract*

*The paper examines the lived experiences of female prisoners from twentieth-century Kerala by analyzing two women's life narratives in Malayalam: Ormakurippukal (1982) by K. Ajitha and Aathmakatha (2010) by K. R. Gauramma. Drawing on Mary Bosworth's Engendering Resistance, the paper examines how two women activists; one a Naxalite and the other a Communist, navigate and negotiate their agency and identity within the carceral system. In the social imagination, their political identities define them. Yet, it was their gender identity that outweighed their political selves both inside and outside the cell. Further, the paper maps the chain of disciplinary violence that women experience in their everyday lives, both inside and outside the prison, by employing Foucauldian idea of 'carceral continuum'. Initiated outside the prison by everyday social structures like family, the violence is perpetuated within carceral spaces by the State. Thus, both the patriarchy and the penitentiary of the State resemble each other in their treatment of women. Additionally, building on Spivak's gendered subaltern, the paper argues that the narrators, despite their political visibility, as presented in the two texts, are victims of marginalization within the carceral space and other patriarchal institutions.*

**Keywords:** Women prisoners, Malayalam prison narratives, gendered subaltern, carceral space, women life narratives

### **Introduction**

Twentieth-century Kerala witnessed the emergence and rise of ideologies like communism and naxalism, along with numerous other social and political movements. The turbulent political scenario contributed to the increased number of political incarcerations, and thereby this period witnessed a significant rise in the number of prison narratives produced in the State. It is a universally acknowledged fact that prison is the microcosm of the society. Hence, apart from documenting the carceral conditions of twentieth-century Kerala, Malayalam prison narratives, also shows the workings of the society at large during the period.

As Claire Westall defines in *Prison Writing and the Literary World*, prison writings are "writing produced by authors with experience of incarceration— largely, but not only, prisoners and former prisoners— and writing including fiction from beyond the prison, that seeks to engage the experience of imprisonment directly" (4). The mainstream prison writing in the country,

more or less aligning with all other literary genres, are mostly the narratives produced by men. Though there are many brilliantly written prison narratives by prominent male figures in the country during the twentieth century, the neglect of equally rich female jail experiences is unjustifiable.

Women prison narratives render the female lived experience of prison significant and open possibilities for critically examining the institution of prison as gendered. Moreover, it exposes the toxic and gender insensitive workings of the Indian prisons, institutions that have been male-centric in design and practice since their birth. In prison studies, prisons are approached mostly as correctional institutions rather than lived spaces. The few studies that focus on the lived experience of imprisonment have overlooked the experiences of women prisoners. This paper attempts to challenge this tendency by reading women's carceral narratives focusing on the female lived experience of prison. The paper examines how the narrators navigate and negotiate through the oppressive conditions of prison, as well as the outside world, by examining two Malayalam life narratives, *Kerala's Naxalbari: Ajitha - Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary (Ormakurippukal)* by K. Ajitha and *Aathmakatha*(2010) by K. R. Gowriyamma. *Ormakurippukal* (1982) got translated into English by Sanju Ramachandran in 2019.

### Literature Review

Michael Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) developed a foundational framework for understanding the disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms of the Western penal system. The key contributions of Foucault include, but are not limited to, the concepts such as 'docile bodies' (138) and 'carceral continuum' (303). Foucault's disciplinary framework laid the foundation for prison studies across the world. Yet limiting of the study to the experiences of male prisoners remains a shortcoming. This gender gap in Foucault's scholarship was vehemently criticized by feminist scholars, and this gap later informed scholars like Meda Chesney Lind and Lisa Pasco, who analysed the trivialization of female victimization and criminality in *The Female Offender: Girls, Women and Crime* (1997). Through empirical research, the book connects the pre-prison experience of women inmates to their experiences within the US prison system, thereby adding on to Foucault's carceral continuum. Lind's arguments were complemented by Mary Bosworth in her *Engendering Resistance: Agency and Power in Women's Prisons* (1999). Unlike Lind and Pasco, Bosworth gives impetus to pre-prison abuses that precedes incarceration. By analysing how women negotiate their agency within carceral institutions, the text challenges the notion that women inmates are mostly passive, by showing how they maintain their resistant identities within the prison. Though these theorists are indispensable when it comes to women's prison studies, they do not address the female carceral experiences from the global south including India. *Women Incarcerated: Narratives from India* (2022), edited by Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta maps the deeply knit connection between the social structures, like family and society, and the State sanctioned disciplinary institutions like prison and court. Uma Chakravarti's "The Dark Night of the Soul: Survival and Despair in Prison 'Diaries'", a chapter in *Women Incarcerated*, details the sinister ways to which the police resorted to extract information from women prisoners during the Naxalite period. This article informs my analysis of Ajitha's memoir as she was imprisoned for participating in Naxal activities. Sharmila Purkayastha, another scholar focusing specifically on Indian women's carceral experiences, offers a historical and political study of women's carceral experiences in post-colonial India in her *Of Captivity and Resistance* (2023). She examines the tortures faced by women prisoners during the Naxalite and Emergency period, which runs parallel to the experiences of Gowriyamma and Ajitha.

## Methodology

This article analyses two Malayalam life narratives; Ajitha's *Kerala's Naxalbari: Ajitha - Memoirs of a Young Revolutionary (Ormakurippukal)* and Gowriyamma's *Aathmakatha* using feminist textual analysis to understand two women's lived experience of the post-colonial Indian prison.

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson put in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), life writing can be defined as a "writing that takes a life, one's own or another's as its subject" (8), and the generic classifications such as "memoir and autobiography are encompassed in the term life writing" (8). The primary texts, despite the stark difference in their implied audience and publication history, reveal the gendered experiences of women in post-colonial Kerala society as well as prison. Thus, the two texts are comparable despite the inherent differences between them. Both the texts are testimonies that unmask the institutional disciplining and denial of agency experienced by two women.

Ajitha's memoir is a consolidated introspection of her revolutionary past. Whereas, Gowriyamma's autobiography remains incomplete, concluding with the description of her first time in police custody. This incompleteness is crucial as it deeply influences what is remembered and what is omitted. Ajitha's text vehemently criticizes the gendered violence within the carceral system under the communist government while Gowriyamma's account of abuses she suffered within prison during the Emergency period is absent in her autobiography.

## Theoretical Framework

The article employs three separate frameworks that interconnectedly examine the texts. Foucault's disciplinary framework reveals how prison functions as a disciplinary space; Bosworth helps in understanding how women prisoners navigate and negotiate their agencies within prison. Further, using Spivak's idea of gendered subaltern, the paper attempts to reveal that despite their social and political standing, women can still be rendered as subaltern within specific institutional contexts. The narrators' political visibility does not hinder the gendered silencing and marginalization they face within patriarchal and carceral settings.

The paper draws upon Michael Foucault's idea of carceral continuum, as put forth in his seminal text *Discipline and Punish* (1975), to examine the carceral space as experienced by two women activists. In doing so, it establishes that their gender identity outweighed their political selves both inside and outside the prison walls. Further, it extends Mary Bosworth's analysis of the lived experience of prison in *Engendering Resistance: Agency and Power in Women's Prisons* to the context of twentieth-century prison in Kerala. Approaching her framework not as a universal model, but as a comparative lens, the paper adapts it into the distinct socio-political context and carceral realities of twentieth-century Kerala. Additionally, building on Spivak's idea of the gendered subaltern, the paper positions Ajitha and Gowriyamma as selectively subalternized subjects whose agency is subordinated within carceral and other patriarchal institutional contexts despite their social visibility and political authority. Rather than claiming them as 'subaltern' in the strict Spivakian sense, the paper argues that they are selectively relegated to marginalized positions in specific institutional contexts where gender identity undermines political prominence. Their political visibility does not prevent them being marginalized within carceral and other ideological settings that are controlled by patriarchy.

## Discussion

*Kerala's Naxalbari*, a memoir written by K. Ajitha, an ex-Naxalite and the only woman who was part of the armed raid conducted by the Naxalites at the Pulpally police station, contains numerous instances of resistance by Ajitha during her nine-year-long sentence across various

jails in Keralam. According to Mary Bosworth, “the exploration of agency and resistance in prison may help to illuminate the women’s ability to evaluate and negotiate power relations despite their subordination and confinement” (121). Despite the unfavorable position as a female prisoner, through adopting various subtle modes of resistance, Ajitha bravely navigates and negotiates the power relations within the carceral space.

As recounted in the memoir, Ajitha goes on numerous hunger strikes during her imprisonment. A noteworthy hunger strike happened when she sought permission to spend some time with her father and other comrades who were in a different ward of the same prison, and the authorities denied the request. Her hunger strike of nineteen days turned out victorious. As Bosworth states “Power, in prison, is constantly negotiated on the level of identity. The prisoners . . . are restricted not only in their movements and opportunities, but also in most of the characteristics typically deemed necessary for active, adult agency, namely choice, autonomy and responsibility. However, these restrictions do not entirely disempower them. Rather, the prisoners are able, to some extent, to ‘get what they want done’ and so to assert themselves as agents” (15). Therefore, such strikes exemplify Ajitha’s attempts to reclaim her agency and identity by not allowing the restrictions imposed on her to entirely silence her. Every time she protested for a cause inside the prison, her stubbornness made the authorities comply with her demands. Various expressions of resistance that depict how Ajitha strategically used the carceral space to exert her agency can be sighted across the memoir.

Apart from demonstrating Ajitha’s agency, certain sections from the narrative also exemplify Foucault’s disciplinary framework, wherein those in positions of power utilize space to intimidate and suppress the subjects. When Ajitha’s mother, Mandakini was arrested under MISA, she was put in the same jail as Ajitha. During this period in Kannur Central Jail, Ajitha had a few issues with another convict which later turned out to be a plan devised by the authorities. “There was a 17-year-old girl in my block . . . She was friendly towards Ma and me, still we had a few arguments. This was sparked off by the authorities to turn her against us. She had to cooperate with them since she was serving life term” (216). This exposes the unscrupulous scheming of the wardens to pitch women against women, a typical isolation tactic employed in the women’s prison. These strategies prove that authorities use psychological manipulation instead of physical control in carceral spaces. This incident is a testimony to Foucault’s argument that power operates through control mechanisms. These control mechanisms paved the way for Ajitha to challenge her material restrictions. As Bosworth puts it “In spite of uniform and prohibitive prison routines, women find the means to negotiate power by articulating their differences” (120).

Even before entering the penitentiary, women are disciplined by everyday social structures that operate as disciplinary institutions aiming to produce what Foucault calls docile bodies. The neglect the two narrators face inside the prison wall mirrors the patriarchal disregard from the outside social structures like family and the respective ideological movements they were part of. By drawing on Foucault’s idea of carceral continuum, which positions prison as a part of the network of social control that runs through the society, the paper aims to highlight how the oppression women face inside the prison is a continuum of the patriarchal control to which they are subjected outside the prison. According to Foucault, “Prison continues . . . a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline. By means of a carceral continuum, the authority that sentences, infiltrates all those other authorities that supervise, transform, correct, improve” (303). The patriarchal forces in the domestic sphere, and prison, are the tools of the very same disciplinary and surveilling network that has been controlling these women long before they entered the prison.

Surveillance and power are two major weapons, possessed by the male dominated society and

the State. These weapons try to regulate a woman's conduct and behaviour both outside and inside the prison. Gowriyamma's detailed accounts about her college days provide a glimpse of how the surveillance mechanisms are directed solely towards the women in the family. When Gowriyamma's love affair is discovered in her house, her father K. A. Raman goes on to read all the letters that came addressed to her, without her consent or knowledge. This kind of surveillance that operates in the household scenario mirrors the surveillance of letters and books addressed to Ajitha by the prison authorities, "The books that my mother brought were censored and given to me only after months of pestering" (236). Analysing the two situations, it is understood that the normalization mechanisms that the prison authorities follow to control the women prisoners are carried out outside the prison walls as well via various social structures. Though the two narrators hail from two different political ideologies, and differ in the power and the influence they hold, one being a Naxalite who was imprisoned for nine years, and the other being one of the very powerful leaders in Kerala Politics; the patriarchal society limits them to their gender identity. It is also worth noting that no matter what the ideology a political party is following, the approach towards women is pathetic. In the epilogue to her memoir, Ajitha writes,

I knew very well how the movement regarded its women. Those days I couldn't have related with feminist ideas, though in my memoirs I have pointed out many instances when I felt discriminated against for being a woman. The male comrades considered women as slaves and sex objects. Women are never involved in the decision-making process. Usually, their opinions were scoffed at and rejected (285).

Similarly, in Gowriyamma's life as well there are many instances when political power and positions were taken away from her, not because she lacked capability, but arguably because she was a woman. During the 1987 legislative assembly elections, the CPI(M) projected her as the CM candidate throughout the election campaigns with the slogan 'Keram thingum Kerala naattil, KR Gouri bharicheedum!'. To the disbelief of the public and Gowriyamma herself, once the election was won by the Left Democratic Front securing 78 seats, E. K. Nayanar was made the Chief Minister of Kerala. Later, in an interview given to journalist Leena Gita Reghunath, Gowriyamma said, "The person who didn't let me be the CM then was E.M. Sankaran Namboodiripad. He said that I am incapable" (Gowriyamma). Political rivals even used her miscarriages to insult her in the assembly, and she was attacked using casteist slurs by her own party members. These incidents are not standalone occurrences. They prove that despite their capabilities women were denied agency by the society, solely on account of their gender. The othering of the two women by the society prior to their incarcerations mirrors the deplorable treatment they received inside the carceral space, revealing the Foucauldian notion of carceral continuum, where prison is a prominent node in the chain of disciplinary operations started by the outside social structures.

In K. R. Gowriyamma's unfinished autobiography, *Aathmakatha*, she writes about her bodily responses to the horrible conditions of the carceral space. She was imprisoned multiple times during her political career, amongst which the first time was for provocative speeches and for engaging in mass agitations. A graphic description of the lock up she was put in this time is given in her narrative. It exposes the distress and the nausea-inducing condition the prisoners are put in. She talks about how all the offenders in a single cell had to defecate and urinate in a pot that was provided and how they could not even sleep inside the cell because of the stench. She says that the cell was a "hell" (377). Such lock-ups, just like the women's cell in Ajitha's narrative, exemplify disciplinary mechanisms which humiliates women's bodies, and show how this torture is normalized within the carceral space. Carceral spaces have been historically structured around the idea of male incarceration, and women prisoners are negotiating their

sense of self within spaces that are designed by men for men. Gowriyamma's account is much similar to Ajitha's description of the state of the women's cell in Kozhikode district prison:

The women's cell was very narrow and congested. There were huge walls around it...I felt as if I was trapped in a deep well with unassailable walls on all sides. The women were lodged in a small block, which had two double rooms and two single rooms. At the end of these rooms was a big pit covered with cement. This was intended for a flush out latrine but the women had to defecate into the small hole in the middle of the slab. This they had to do in the open as the toilet was without any cover. The smell of faeces always filled the air (192).

Both the experiences are similar in showing that carceral space is constructed in a way that torture by the authorities, compelling women to urinate and defecate in front of fellow inmates and stripping them of dignity, is rendered normal inside the prison setting. While insights from Foucault aids in mapping the disciplinary mechanism employed by prison to produce docile bodies, Bosworth's framework helps unmask how the narrators strive to maintain their agency despite the unfavorable circumstances.

While the experience of imprisonment in itself is not a normal occurrence in a person's life irrespective of their gender, the experience of being a woman prisoner in a carceral system tailored to inhabit male prisoners poses an entirely different set of challenges. Being a woman inside the post-colonial Indian prison raises two sets of challenges; first is posed by the patriarchal forces inside the prison, and the second is by the State-sanctioned disciplinary mechanisms. This paper positions Gowriyamma and Ajitha as selectively subalternized subjects whose political visibility did not prevent them from being subjected to brutal violence within the carceral as well as the patriarchal settings. Gowriyamma has famously stated that if *lathis* could reproduce she would have borne many *lathi* babies (qtd. in Mukesh), a statement that reveals the sexual abuse and violence she had to suffer inside the prison walls during the emergency period.

Similarly, when Ajitha recounts about the first time she was captured by the police after the Naxalite insurgency, it carries the weight of the panic-stricken heart of a woman who was aware of the possibility of her getting raped in police custody. Though all her comrades, along with her, were equally beaten up by the police, no others had to bother about being sexually violated, as Ajitha was the only woman in the group. Ajitha writes, "They came to me several times in the night in obvious attempts to rape me. Somehow, they didn't want to open the lock up, get inside and rape me. So, they kept calling me to the door, but I didn't go near the iron bars of the lock up. My heart was filled with aversion. I could gather from the way they treated us that the police were a deprived lot" (117). This is a shocking revelation as the behavior was coming from people who were appointed to protect the ones under custody. It is only at a later point in her life that Ajitha realized that the reason why she was not raped while under custody was because the then minister Gowriyamma, had given stringent orders that nothing untoward like it should happen. It is unsettling that a horrific act like 'rape' is bound to happen to a person under the custody of the State, until and unless a higher official intervenes to prevent it. This incident underscores that despite their spatial location and irrespective of their socio-political standing, women are never entirely free of the clutches of patriarchal violence and abuse. Thus, inside the state-sanctioned penitentiary and other gendered institutional settings, Ajitha and Gowriyamma led the lives of selectively subalternized subjects who were denied agency, respect and basic human consideration. As Spivak rightly said, "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (83).

## Conclusion

Gowriyamma's *Aathmakatha* and Ajitha's *Kerala's Naxalbari* are not merely two life

narratives; they are texts that expose the structural inequalities within the twentieth-century Malayali society and penitentiary. Analysing the narratives through the theoretical lenses of Foucault, Bosworth and Spivak shows that disciplining women's bodies and denying them agency are not phenomena that the prison initiate. It is within the inherently patriarchal society of post-colonial Kerala that this control, surveillance, and disciplining begin. The narratives reveal how patriarchal violence directed towards women is perpetuated through ideological movements, familial structures, as well as the State-sponsored disciplinary institutions. Even though the article's theoretical framework is primarily rooted in two Western theories, it relocates the analytical focus from Western carceral narratives to two regional Malayalam texts. In doing so, the paper makes a clear intervention in the field of feminist prison studies. The western perspectives are employed to examine how disciplinary power and gendered marginalization are operated within the post-colonial carceral setting of Kerala. Bringing Spivak into the discussion reveals that even the politically visible women cannot entirely escape the gender marginalization. The paper calls for detailed and continued research on women's prison experiences from regional perspectives through the frameworks of intersecting identity markers such as gender, class, caste, etc. to understand the layered nature of abuse women prisoners suffer, and the pervasive functions of patriarchy in women's lives.

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