

# Revisiting Trauma: Wounds Seen and Unseen in Canadian and Indian Prison Narratives

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## Abstract

Trauma Studies and Prison Narratives have emerged over the past few decades as the most significant fields in the humanities. There has been a significant discussion regarding the psychological effects of incarceration; however, literature examining prison as a site of trauma is unusual. Focusing on Iftikhar Gilani's *My Days in Prison* (2005) and Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe's *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), the article analyzes how prison narratives represent prison as a violent space that inflicts trauma in its characters. These prison narratives represent Yvonne Johnson, the prisoner in *Stolen Life*, and Gilani as victims of acute psychological trauma faced due to the sheer viciousness of the prison system. The article also concentrates on how the prison experience is both similar and different in Canada and India.

## Keywords

Prison Experience; Trauma; Sexual Abuse; Violence; Incarceration

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“Prison is being naked emotionally for the first time in your memory, with nowhere to hide... I build walls around my feelings and barricade my heart as best I can. I count my months, my days, until canteen, until lockup, until release. I feel anxiety and deep depression sometimes when I look at the calendar. The world is farther away with every season. My survival here is all I have.” -Prisoner at Prison for Women, prior to its closing (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990).

In the preface of *Words from Inside*, formerly incarcerated author Stephen Reid writes, "Walk into any Canadian city lockup where no writing instruments are permitted, and the first thing to strike you will be the amount of graffiti scratched on the walls" (Reid). Reid underlines the relationship between the writing and prison, a standard conception of the prison as a contemplative space. His consideration of graffiti captures the ways prison formulates the prison text. Similarly, writing and reading are prohibited for prisoners in some Indian prisons as well. They can only read “shlokas and quotations adorning the walls of the prison cell as there are no facilities to write to convey their feelings”(Gilani 26). Frank Guiney, a prisoner writing in the 1970s, asserts, "There is something about a prison cell that awakens in almost everyone a craving for expression" ("Poetry in Prison"6). Writing to express the abuse prisoners face during incarceration becomes a testament to surviving the dislocations of prison experiences.

While prisoners opt for writing to retrieve their identities as publicly condemned individuals, they also discuss their inability to organize emotions and cope with their diminished sense of self. The need for voicing pain could be the purpose behind writing in prison. Carceral Writing is a principal act, which serves “more than subjects of genre and style may acknowledge” (Rhymes 10). The function of Prison Literature as 'social praxis,' its call to instigate political or social change, develops a "critical theory of justice and freedom for writers and readers” (Hames-Garcia xlv).

As a literary genre, Prison Literature examines the incarceration experiences of the inmates filled with intense pain and distress. H. Bruce Franklin coined this term in 1978 when he published the first edition of *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*(1982). Author Deena Rhymes asserts, "Prison literature occupies a curious, one might even say paradoxical, place in a society's philosophical and literary

imagination [and] the writing of incarcerated subjects represents that part of the social body that has been denied, the "excess" that has been cast aside" (23). Prison Literature as a genre raises voice against injustice, discrimination, and law. The prisoners write primarily within the framework of their individual experiences. These writings serve as fundamental testimonies to prison life that otherwise remain silenced due to the prison administration system over what happens behind bars. Unfortunately, prison texts receive an insignificant amount of attention in the outside world, as the prisoners themselves produce most of them. They are almost absent from the literary archives as they have not played a role in theoretical discussions of incarceration.

In *The Prison Community* (1940), sociologist Donald Clemmer claims that the incarceration experience is not ordinary or natural; consisting of humiliating experiences an individual might endure. Some literature asserts that the prisoners experience mental deterioration, which eventually results in trauma.<sup>1</sup> Criminologist Gresham Sykes describes this psychological pain of incarceration as "deprivations or frustrations," and proposes that some of these frustrations "appear as a serious attack on the personality, as a threat to the life goals of the individual, to his defensive system, to his self-esteem, or his feelings of security" (64). Incarceration may cause emotional and psychological trauma in prisoners who belong to minoritized backgrounds, resulting from a lack of confidence to deal with the situation, demoralization, loss of personal security, and prison conditions. Illustrating the recent reevaluations of trauma theory, the article comparatively investigates Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe's *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* and Iftikhar Gilani's *My Days in Prison*. These prison narratives depict Yvonne Johnson, the prisoner in *Stolen Life*, and Gilani as victims of acute psychological trauma faced due to the sheer viciousness of the prison system.

Written in collaboration with Rudy Wiebe, *Stolen Life* is "flooded with victim literature," which narrates how Yvonne Johnson, an Indigenous Cree woman, happened to be the only Indigenous woman who served twenty-five years imprisonment (167). In the year 1991, she was charged with homicide for the death of Wetaskiwin Man and imprisoned at the Kingston Prison for Women (P4W) and the OkimawOhci Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan. On the other hand, Gilani's *My Days in Prison* is a grim chronicle of the capriciousness of power and dehumanizing ways of prison officials. He was accused of collecting data on army formations and deployment of security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. Charged under the official Secret act of 1923, which entails a fourteen-year-old jail term, Gilani was unjustly imprisoned for seven months. The pervasive existence of victimization has significantly influenced their lives as both victims and witnesses to the violence. Prison dynamics may create uniquely painful experiences for prisoners who already experience cultural victimization in the forms of racism and classism - among other forms of oppression-- in their daily lives. In what follows, I analyze how prison narratives represent prison as a violent space that inflicts trauma in its characters and how the prison experience is both similar and different in Canada and India. The article presents a comparative analysis of prison conditions in both countries to demonstrate how racism and torture degraded the two prisoners', i.e.,

Yvonne Johnson and Iftikhar Gilani, lives leaving them scarred forever. Johnson, an Indigenous woman, and Gilani, a Muslim, underwent depression and “misery compounded by helplessness” (Gilani 71). Their traumatic experiences resulting from their harsh treatment led to depersonalization, and liberation became their dream.<sup>2</sup>The separation from their loved ones left them emotionally drained, and they got trapped in an endless spiral of despair for an extended period.

Prisoners in India and Canada who have confronted extreme coercive threats have to become habituated to them if they desire to sustain themselves behind bars. In both states, the incarceration of Indigenous peoples and Muslims is an epidemic. According to *The Guardian*, one-third of Canada's prisoners are Indigenous caused by racism in policing and poverty rates. They are more likely to face systemic inequities as they are sent to maximum security facilities and are recipients of maltreatment and barbarity. Likewise, two-thirds of prisoners in India belong to the most vulnerable segments of Indian society, namely Dalits and Muslims. These two communities comprise more than half of the prison population not because they commit more crimes, but due to their economic precarity and the power, they lack to deal with the legal system and are languishing in prisons.

In both countries, the criminal justice system is, at times, unfair due to racial profiling, over-criminalization, and institutionalized discrimination. Sometimes, the captives are forced into solitary confinement for more than a year and are more likely to commit suicide. Gilani states: "The inmate is locked up for twenty-three hours a day and not allowed to interact with anyone. He is only allowed to walk in the corridor for one hour in a day" (45). Gilani was not even allowed "the luxury of an hour's walk in the corridor" (46). He realizes that nothing could be more brutalizing than the absence of human beings.

An American author, Jack Abbott, served sentences for manslaughter and murder, spent much time in solitary confinement, and eventually committed suicide.<sup>3</sup> Rather than serving time in prison for a limited period to be rehabilitated into society, the prisoners become a constituent of the prison system. The fundamental prisoners' rights, which are at times violated by the prison system, lead to their deplorable prison conditions, resulting in dysfunctional personalities in times of post-prison adjustment.<sup>4</sup> A survivor of physical and mental abuse in a residential school, Mi'kmaw poet Rita Joe explicates the plight of Indigenous peoples due to the deleterious effects of the justice system in her poem “Justice.” She asserts: "Justice seems to have many faces / It does not want to play if my skin is not the right hue" (Joe 55).<sup>5</sup> She represents justice as an 'open field' that we 'are afraid to approach' as the road to the justice system is littered with destructive forces.

In some cases, the prisoners are falsely framed and prosecuted, which may have terrible consequences. Gilani and his wife experienced a "sort of psychological pressure" when he was wrongfully accused of acting as an ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan) agent (46). Leonard Peltier, who was unjustly convicted of murder in 1975, deals with the pains of imprisonment as a Native American man because of his race. In

his *Prison Writings: My life is My Sun Dance* (1999), he portrays the prison through a broad comparison with hell.

I walked in my shackles and leg-irons up the front steps to the first of a seemingly endless series of steel doors. I thought I could hear distant screams coming from somewhere within the building.... when I turned to one of the marshals who was leading me up the stairs, hoping to find some glint of human warmth in his eyes, I saw, instead, not a face at all, but a mask of absolute hatred and a look in his eyes so vile that it can't even be described ... He just smiled a devil's smile and said in an almost cheerful voice, "You're dead, you fucking Indian bastard, you'll never get out of this building alive." (Peltier155-56).

Upon his entry into prison, he perceives other prisoners to be revenants of wounded souls. He does not receive grace as part of his condemnation as a "fucking Indian bastard." The eternal punishment continues as the marshal's head and face, "turn into a serpent's, spitting its venom at me"(Peltier156).

Author Deena Rhymns states that the first thing the inmates write about after being imprisoned in their surroundings. The writer's observation of their prison cell is a common trope found in the works of prominent prison authors such as Nelson Mandela and Ruth First. The inscriptions scratched on the prison walls in defiance of their segregation are an act of deterritorialization. According to Werner Sedlak, this representation of the physical features of prison is called "an appropriation of space"<sup>6</sup>(Sedlak190). Johnson describes the prison cell in the Kingston Prison for Women:

The range cells are like cages, six feet by nine; you can hardly turn around and you face tall windows across a wide corridor and can't see anything coming unless you angle a hand mirror—if you've got one- through the bars of your door. In the newer wings...the cells open onto an inner corridor and each cell has its own window. Mine faces a wall, but a small pane in it opens and a little real air can come in. The ranges are noisier and nastier—yells and shouting really echo around stone and steel—but I'm here for life, so after four months of range they placed me in the Wing, where it's quiet and private ( Wiebe 324).

Her words deliver a sense of being overwhelmed by her prison environment. It is awful to learn that Johnson had acquired privacy after getting imprisoned. Her private space turned into a cage. The description gives a sense of turmoil in her surroundings through the minute details of the prison structure.

While translating the prison experience, the inmates struggle to find a language to reorient themselves within their milieu. Poet John Rives' statement, "I would offer you my silence; / lost in a tangle of / words, words, words," captures the inability to articulate

the prison space for himself and his readers ("Pinup" 24-26). In *Stolen Life*, Johnson grapples with putting her experiences to paper as she says, "I've learned so much about myself, I can't write at all, or fast enough, I can't write it the way it should be said" (19). Rudy Wiebe helped her break the silence by collaborating with her in 1992 when she was a prisoner at P4W, which started with Johnson sending a letter to him introducing herself as the great-great-granddaughter of Plains Cree chief Big Bear. She turned to Wiebe as a collaborator for his proven advocacy for First Nations peoples with his widely acclaimed novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973).<sup>7</sup> She established herself as a descendant of Big Bear, a Cree chief, and a romantic hero in the history of the British move west in Canada. Wiebe accepted the common interest in "this self-aware, storytelling descendant of the historical Big Bear" (Wiebe and Johnson 14), and eventually agreed to recover and retell the story, a five-year collaboration resulting in the success of *Stolen Life*.

In Henri Lefebvre's view, "prison, with its spatial arrangements and a system of regulations, is an example of 'Dominated space'" (190). It is usually 'closed, sterilized, and emptied out' (190). The prison system exercises control over the prisoners putting them inside borders. Johnson's description of her prison experiences in P4W, a dominating space, reveals her many years of voicelessness. Her use of words like "limits," "fences," and "boundaries" to describe The Healing Lodge locate her inside borders (Wiebe and Johnson 7). Besides this, P4W is the most important space in the books as she starts to interact more with her Indigenous side. She says,

I haven't seen the stars for months. I came in the spring, the end of April sometime, to the Kingston Prison for Women, and there must have been summer too and fall, and now my first Christmas in Ontario has come, 1991. And snow is falling. I have lots of time to watch it drift down against the grey limestone concrete walls that go up into black. There is something black over me, like a huge trapdoor - and I can't move it. (323)

She captures the atmosphere of hopelessness that besieges her in prison. She has not "seen the stars for months," suggesting a nightmarish vision of the future; the earth below was extremely overwhelmed by traumatic events for her. The "grey limestone" walls turning black symbolize vacuum in her life. The black colour signifies darkness inflicted by gloomy figures such as her brother Leon, who harassed her frequently. The 'huge trapdoor' stands for space that she occupied to hid from the assailants.

Johnson took birth with a double cleft- palate that restricted her communication and grew up a "halfbreed" in Butte, Montana. She endured physical and sexual violence in her family and lost her eldest brother, who is possibly murdered by the police. Wiebe narrated the incidents of her life and presented her journal entries, which describe her traumatizing past. The first half of the book discusses Johnson and Wiebe's relationship and the process of witnessing. Psychiatrist Dorilaub explains:

To a certain extent, the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for

bearing witness that previously the narrator felt [s]he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, making something like a repossession of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the reemerging truth ("An Event Without a Witness" 85).

He focuses on trust and reciprocity, which is fundamental to the act of witnessing. In Shoshana Felman's view, the act of reading can be an act of bearing witness. For both texts, the reader acts as a 'proxy witness' to Gilani and Johnson's trauma.

Johnson suffered violence and sexual abuse committed by relatives and strangers since her childhood and continued through her early years and adult life. She describes Wiebe her first moments of sexual abuse:

My first attack happened when I was between two to three years old. ... The attack on me was by a grown man, by my brother Leon [eight and a half years old at that time], and later on by three other boys, one was tall with red hair. (334).

Due to her impeded speech, she could not tell others what she had to endure as a child. 'Mom could never understand me,' she writes. 'I would try and talk, but she was always so busy – so many kids – and she never had time to figure me out. Sometimes she'd just sit and cry, "What do you want? I don't know what you're saying, I can't do anything." So I'd wind up shutting up, or crying' (29). There was a significant relationship between her inability to communicate with her mother and the traumatic influence of the violence meted out to her.

In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Sigmund Freud attempts to connect the individual experience of trauma to 'the collective, transgenerational, and religious history' of the Jewish people (Freud 67). Johnson also suffers collective trauma throughout her life at the hands of relatives, strangers, and the criminal justice system. She narrates her story to break the silence attempted by the structures of patriarchy to which Wiebe states, "Yes—but it'll be hard. There are so many people in your life, no story is ever only yours alone" (Wiebe and Johnson 24). Johnson responds, "Maybe not only my story—but it is mine. Others maybe won't agree, but I want to tell my life the way I see it" (24). Gilmore states, "Trauma is never exclusively personal" (Gilmore 31). Cathy Caruth echoes these thoughts, and puts it: "History, like trauma, is never simply one's own [...] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth 24). Johnson already understands that her closed ones would not even pay attention to her words. They deny the story she narrates. Her wish for belonging remains unfulfilled by her household.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Gilani became the victim of cultural trauma as his fellow prisoners were also tortured and beaten mercilessly. He witnessed the number of suicides that took place inside the prison. While serving in prison, an accused spy hanged himself in the

jail's toilet because his jail pleas were declined. The constant threat of violence resulted in hopelessness and a belief in a "prolonged stay in jail" (Gilani7). His writing testifies against his experiences of inequity and injustice faced by his cultural community as well. He reveals the legal and government rhetoric that has misstated him and concentrates on the effect that this rhetoric has had on him and his fellow prisoners' lives.

Gilani's alienation also begins with his inability to express himself while serving as an inmate as there were no facilities to write in prison. He was accused of being a "very dangerous prisoner" (42) and was utterly isolated. The in-charge led him through 'a maze of corridors' till they reached the 'kaalkothari' or 'death cell' wherein he was thrown into solitary confinement. He describes:

I was thrust into a small cell measuring eight feet by six feet. It was completely bare except for a thick layer of dust. Attached to it was a filthy toilet, which did not have doors or curtains. I was completely and utterly isolated. I did not see the face or hear the voice of any prisoner (42).

Coupled with physical and psychological abuse, he suffers at the hands of Tihar Special Police personnel; his physical self-consciousness results in social isolation. This social isolation led to mistrust and hostility towards others in prison. Unjustly imprisoned, Gilani was accused of sending out information to Pakistan-based commander-in-chief about Indian security agencies' progress. According to *the People's Union for Democratic Rights'* (PUDR) report, he was considered "anti-national" and "morally depraved" who not only watches pornography but also incites others into depravity (Gilani114).

Racial discrimination has been rampant in both Indian and Canadian prisons, which is another reason for the inmates to experience traumatic episodes. Gilani states that there is a disproportionately high percentage of Muslims among the prisoners, and most of them are incarcerated for reportedly committing trivial offenses.<sup>9</sup> He suffered violence both due to his race and false accusation as a "dangerous Pakistani spy in the eyes of the government" (5). Michel Foucault discusses 'docile bodies' that have experienced such religion-sponsored oppression. In earlier times, the monks in religious institutions were put through a prisoned order. In Johnson's case, when Wiebe reacts to the counselor's comments about why she needs his support, he replies: 'I'm an aging, professional man, exactly the kind of "powerful White" who's so often created problems for her. Isn't there someone else who should work with her, a woman, a Native writer?' The counselor responds: "Vonnie trusts you. Honesty is the key for her, no bullshit, no avoiding. When you're in her shoes, maybe a White male is safer to trust than a Native" (Wiebe and Johnson 41). As an aboriginal woman, Johnson could not express herself until a white narrative instance has acknowledged its place within a landscape. She was "forced to become a watcher and listener" (77) and asks, "Who am I and why am I here?"

According to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* report, aboriginal people were forced to shatter their cultural connections and identity.<sup>10</sup> They were unspeakable due to their diminished identity and cultural values, which were

confiscated and destroyed. Johnson writes:

O creator, I have lived a captive from the day I was born, my children have been torn from me as Big Bear's people were torn from him, his spirit was divided, there was nothing left but to die. I do not know my family, or where they are, they do not know me. O Creator, when will it end? We have survived five hundred years, when will the Native people again thrive in peace? (433)

Johnson was also a victim of chronic and silent trauma that stopped her from breaking the silence as an Indigenous woman. In DoriLaub's view, "The 'not telling' of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny" (Laub79). In such cases, "the events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events" ("An Event Without a Witness" 79). Johnson spent time in writing as a form of testimony and is capable of stating the reality of her flashbacks, which were once doubted.

Physical and sexual assault and violence are intertwined, as both the narratives make clear. As Gilani and Johnson recount their prison experiences, it becomes evident that torture and dehumanization have been normalized. Upon entry in the Tihar Jail complex gates, Gilani was led to the undertrial office wherein the superintendent asked his name. Before he could utter a word, a staffer slapped him. He states:

I was kicked from behind, blows rained on my back and someone grabbed my chair and banged my head against the table. Blood started oozing out of my mouth. My nose and ears started bleeding too. Accompanying these blows were the choicest abuses. 'Saala, gaddar, Pakistani agent,' they were screaming. 'People like you should not be allowed to live. Traitors should be hanged straightaway' (40).

The language conveys the intense pain and abuse he suffered during the seven months of imprisonment. He was considered 'gaddar' (treacherer) as he was accused of being a militant, smuggler, and jihadi for acting as an ISI agent. He found the incarceration experience traumatic because of the threat of violence that made him feel helpless about the degree to which he could protect himself. Similarly, Johnson's description of sexual and physical violence gives a sense of degradation. Shirley Anne, her cousin, was suspicious that Chuck Skwarok sexually abused Johnson's daughter. Salmon made Johnson believe that Skwarok is guilty of these crimes. On his arrival, confrontation with Skwarok resulted in a vicious assault by Johnson, Salmon, Ernest Jensen, and her partner, Dwayne Wenger. Though she accepts her involvement in the attack on Skwarok in the basement, Salmon and Jensen waged the central part of the attack. Salmon was sentenced to twenty months for assault while Johnson was accused of

first-degree murder and got imprisoned for twenty-five years. She realizes: "when the law-enforcement system seizes you as a criminal, the world changes. You may never recognize yourself again" (281). Johnson lost her sense of identity while suffering abuse and betrayal since her childhood. Her life was flooded with sexual assault, an ongoing source of trauma. When her relative raped her, she said:

What's so special about my ugly body, men forcing themselves into every opening in it – why don't they just slash open my belly and wash their face in my guts as I die in one piece. At least I'd know it was final. But no, they ram themselves into me and defile my life forever (174).

Her words depict her frustration because of individuals who objectified her body every now and then. She was continuously fraught with fear and silence so much that she could not love her body as it seemed 'ugly' to her. In her case, life has been shaped by male violence from early childhood. Hers is a pathos of alienation stemming from her early struggles of language due to the physical deformity of a cleft palate. She explains, "My basic problem was the way I was born; in the center of my face, where my nose, top lip, gums, and roof of my mouth should have been, there was only folded tissue that left a gap in my upper mouth" (29). She states that this deformity began a frustrating and prolonged experience to communicate. She always served as a mute child and did not utter a single word in her defence.

It was like being deaf but still hearing, speaking but speechless—it was there, heaping up inside me. I could not ask questions, just puzzle everything around inside my head, dreaming it, bouncing it back and forth, without any guidance to help me understand. So I learned by instinct [...] To depend only on myself. There was no one else. My mind was my best, really my only, companion. But I think that then, on a deeper level, my spirit already knew and understood how much I was being hurt. The impact I wore in silence, and shed in tears. (30)

Johnson's trauma begins with the silence that was imposed on her by her family members and strangers. In Cathy Caruth's view, the unforeseen incidents and traumatic events are not sufficiently experienced when they take place but reappear in the form of hallucination, frightening experiences, flashbacks, and nightmares. Johnson revisited her past experiences of unspeakability and was dependent solely on herself. Her trauma stems from her aboriginal identity resisting herself from breaking the silence against the violent assaults she endured throughout her life.

In his *Trauma, Absence, Loss* (1999), LaCapra describes 'absence' as "the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted" (698). The traumatic episodes of the past result in 'endless melancholy,' making it impossible for the victim to engage fully with the present or look forward to the future.

Gilani and Johnson underwent 'absence' of "communicating sounds," (Wiebe and Johnson 78) love and trust, which created a state of disorientation and agitation in their melancholic lives. Both the prisoners survived with haunting memories and images of ferociousness, which made their existence as being on the ice, which connotes dead. Johnson states: "So prison is no place to recover. From anything, either the grief of memory, or loss, or abuse, or the diseases of addiction" (387). For both Gilani and Johnson, the prison was no "fairy-tale world," (Darabont, *The Shawshank Redemption* 1994), and it only served as an ugly entanglement of their tormented emotions and traumatic experiences. Their mind had turned into a carceral body due to extreme isolation.

Johnson began understanding her trauma in prison when she did not have alcohol for an extended period, which she used to consume to distance herself from possible memories of what happened to her. Like other trauma victims, she describes the first emergence of her traumatic flashbacks into the language being triggered by a single word. 'Is something the matter?' a guard in P4W questioned her. 'You walk around all day like a zombie' (332). Johnson then reports: 'It was the name Leon always used on me. And suddenly I just blurted out, 'I'm having these terrible — not nightmares ... sort of pictures ... things about when I was little, that have always been there, somewhere, but more and more, I don't know, I can't stop them'. (332) Johnson experienced repeated acts of sexual abuse committed by her brother, Leon. He continued to rape her, and she remembers being raped by her father and grandfather as well. Her silence was a sign of trauma, in which pain and fear were sealed beyond language:

When I was first attacked, I could not speak to be understood, I did not know what happened to me, just pain and scared emotions and thoughts of pain recalled.... At that age I had nothing to compare, that act is all I had. You learn something because people tell you the story around it — well, this was not my case. I had no story. I registered what happened to me as pain, hate, bitterness, yelling, crying, mass confusion with no explanation. (337)

She details her traumatic events of chronic sexual abuse in a witness statement. She was considered as "retarded," "dumb shit," "knothead," and "zombie," and hence, her wordlessness became the reason to endure hopeless misery (34).

Though both the prisoners faced physical and psychological abuse, Gilani, unlike Johnson, was not subjected to sexual abuse in his childhood and while serving as an inmate. Their prison life and violence differ from each other in terms of their crime and period of incarceration. Johnson was suspected of strangulation and killing of Skwarok and found guilty of first-degree murder for twenty-five years, while Gilani was wrongfully imprisoned for seven months, and the officials and politicians kept him behind bars deliberately. The media believed that a tremendous amount of money and ornaments had been recovered from his house. In his words, "law is a perplexing creature," which throws poor people in jails for petty offences (Gilani7).

The prison experiences to which the two prisoners were subjected reveal the inhuman treatment meted out to them. In the final pages, Johnson writes, 'I was told that my life was hard, and it would remain so. I was told to keep seeking, I was told you do not give your pain to the spirit world, you must give your pain away' (Wiebe and Johnson 438). Though writings by Indigenous prisoners were doubly marginalized, she has eventually given away her intense pain by writing it out. The details of sexual violence led to participation in murdering someone. Likewise, Gilani spoke for himself against the dehumanizing ways of prison officials and got himself out of the 'fresh nightmare' of violence and mistrust. The narrative set up of both the prison accounts raises complex issues such as violence, abuse, and discrimination prevalent in prisons. Both Gilani and Johnson chose writing to vocalize their trauma, which ultimately led to their "freedom." Gilani puts his happiness in words: "I could not believe that it was not a dream. That I was actually going to be free again. Free from the incarceration, the charges and, hopefully, the stigma" (Gilani1). They proceed to lead a life they can now claim is theirs, with its all contradictions, its pain, its guilt, and desire. Both the authors end their texts with the achievement of a sense of reconciliation with their minoritized identities.

### Notes

1. See Lorna A. Rhodes.
2. According to Viktor Frankl, the author of *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), Depersonalization is defined as the state where everything seems dreamlike and unreal. The prisoners faced confusion between their dreams and reality so much that it still seemed unreal when their dream came true.
3. Philip Markoff, an American medical student, accused of armed robbery, was indicted for first-degree murder and Lynn Turner, an American author, convicted of her husband's murder, is among some notable personalities who died by suicide awaiting trials.
4. The right to humane facilities and conditions, free from sexual crimes and racial segregation, express condition complaints, and assert their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act are a few prisoners' fundamental rights. For more information, see *the Rights of Inmates*, created by FindLaw's Team.
5. As an orphan, Rita Joe was sent to a residential school where she could not use her native language and create a link to her culture. Eventually, she became the victim of physical and mental abuse. Deena Rhymns notes similarities between residential schools and prisons. Students were made guilty of their own identities. For more information, see Deena Rhymns' *From the Iron House* (2008), part two, "Genre in the Institutional Setting of the Residential School."
6. Henri Lefebvre states: "an appropriation of space takes place when a space is modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group and when creativity is involved in the process (190).
7. Rudy Wiebe worked closely with aboriginal people which made Johnson feel comfortable while narrating her story to him. In the course of their collaboration, Wiebe received more than fifteen notebooks, and most of them included over a hundred pages. Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* first questioned 'the great amnesia [that] descended on Canadians as a result of the crushing of Indian leadership after the rising of 1885.' For further references, see J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-*

*White Relations in Canada*, U of Toronto P (Toronto, 2000 [1989]), p.253.

8. Johnson's family members also suffered intergenerational trauma which resulted in a split group identity. Her mother studied at a residential school which, according to Johnson, is similar to a prison. She feels that imprisonment is not a new state for Indigenous peoples.

9. In India, Muslims are considered terrorists in prisons simply because they had sported beards and Muslim names. They are more likely to face the death penalty. For more information, see M Reyaz's *Why the number of minorities in jails is rising in India*.

10. The land of aboriginal people was seized, and their languages and cultures were suppressed. The parents of aboriginal people were considered to be unfit by the Canadian Government. Their educational goals were restricted, and the lack of supervision created situations where students were prone to sexual and physical offensive threats.

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