

INCARCERATION, TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE IN MARINA NEMAT'S *PRISONER OF TEHRAN: A MEMOIR*

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ABSTRACT

Iranian memoirs narrate the horrific experiences of people in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. The memoirs are mostly written by female authors because they have endured brutal, physical, and psychological trauma under a highly oppressive system. They struggle to find a platform for expressing their indomitable spirit of resilience and story of survival. These memoirs have always served as a paradigm to the rest of the world. These can be viewed as real and raw testimonials for understanding Iran since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Revolution acted as a catalyst by providing the courage and energy essential for the writers to pen down the darkest experiences witnessed by them. Marina Nemat, an Iranian-born author and human rights activist, is a former prisoner of conscience. She was arrested at the age of sixteen for opposing the Islamic regime's policies and sent to Evin Prison where she was inhumanly tortured. Her memoir titled *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir* (2007) records her lived experiences of violence and betrayal that shape futures, relationships and self-perception. The brutality of political and ideological repression and the subsequent imprisonment is reflected in the memoir. The study examines the systemic injustices and brutality where basic human rights, freedom and peaceful co-existence is curtailed. This paper discusses how despite facing criticisms and her ideologies and writings being tagged as Orientalist discourse, Nemat regains her perspicacity and true self from the traumatic experiences by writing about it.

Key Words: *Memoirs, Islamic revolution, political prisoner, physical torture, psychological trauma, resilience and survival.*

The tormenting experiences and horrendous encounters during the period of Islamic Revolution, the Iran- Iraq war and also the shift of power forms the core of memoirs written by Iranian female writers. The period was highly challenging for women as they were silenced by the regime. They suffered under a highly noxious power and wanted the world to know how it felt like to live under their regime. The ideas of rebellion and liberation stirred up the minds of the women for a long time. But they never found a platform to let it out. The 1979 Revolution fueled the spark and women realized the need to be empowered. The revolution administered courage in them to speak against the detrimental power and let the world know about their near-death distressing experiences.

A tremendous advancement in the writing of memoirs by Iranian women could be traced since the 1979 Revolution, *Prisoner of Tehran* by Marina Nemat is a memoir that deals with the narrator's personal experiences of political and ideological repression. The memoir narrates her life, before arrest inside Evin Prison and after her release. Nemat was arrested at 16 for questioning the policies of the Islamic regime at school. The physical and mental trauma endured by Nemat, her friends and other co-prisoners inside Evin Prison is brought to light through this memoir. The darkest and bitter truth is the violation of human rights inside the prison and this happens to both men and women. This was observed during the 1980s and continues till date. The violations of Human Rights are reported by prisoners worldwide. The abuse they face can be listed as physical, emotional and mental. Nemat was taken by the guards of the Iran Revolutionary regime from her home on January 15, 1982. She was accused of being involved in political activities that spread ideas against the ideologies propagated by the Islamic

government in Iran. Similar accusations were also charged upon many young students, both male and female, and were arrested during the same period for revolting against the Islamic government led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of Islamic revolution, was also a radical cleric. His new rule and laws implemented under it have undone the laws implemented under the revised law: mandatory hijab for women, which was previously not practiced. The Islamic government made plans to exert strict control over its female population by making hijab mandatory for them. And intensified enforcement for violations of dress code.

Apart from the strict dress code enforced upon women; laws limiting judicial and political roles of women were also put in action. Strict gender segregation in public places was followed by law. Women were also restricted by imposing travel bans, family law reforms and restrictions in the workplace. They also have to suffer long years of incarceration for taking part in revolutionary activities. These newly enforced restrictions were strict contradictions to women's freedom, empowerment and advanced upgrades on gender initiated by the Shah government. These were the early indications of nullifying the advancement of women who were taking prominent steps backwards. Nemat was born to a Russian- Iranian orthodox Christian family in 1965. Split between her home in Tehran and summers by the Caspian Sea, she lived a peaceful childhood. She loved to read English books and novels and usually got it secretly from the nearby book store. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 disrupted her studies as her schooling was uprooted. Nemat noticed that the school has become a mere place for moral policing. It has been changed into the mouth piece of the Islamic government and started to spread their ideas among students. Academic activities, teaching and learning no longer happened at school. This change forced Nemat to question one of her teachers. Later, she even took part in a student-led protest at school. The Head of the school reported Nemat's and her friends' names to the government guards. She was arrested on political charges and was interrogated and imprisoned in the notorious Evin Prison. A death sentence was also imposed upon her.

Men and women who publicly protested against the autocracy were imprisoned by the Khomeini rule. They were viewed as possible threats to their power. The Khomeini rule's power structure was designed in such a way that it held certain cultural and gender-based beliefs. Regarding women in the country. The head of these Institutions and other authorities were also blind followers and practitioners of these ideologies. Thus, it became far easier for the State to exert its control throughout the country. Imprisonment, torture and murder was the tool used by the highly repressive government to silence its enemies and protestors. The imprisonment takes place in the Evin prison located in the Evin neighborhood of Tehran in Iran. The prison was established in 1972 but became notorious during the Islamic revolution of 1979 as it became the most infamous detention facility of the Islamic Republic. Nemat could never keep herself away from the harsh memories of Evin even after her release. She realized that writing about the period could actually help her come out of the trauma:

The past was gaining on me, and I couldn't keep it at bay; I had to face it or it would completely destroy my sanity. If I couldn't forget, perhaps the solution was to remember. I began writing about my days in Evin-Tehran's notorious political prison- about the torture, pain, death, and all the suffering I had never been able to talk about. My memories became words and broke free from their induced hibernation (2).

Nemat's only hope to overcome her fear was to write it by remembering each and every moment she lived inside the prison. She felt the need to share her experience in Evin; thus, her memories became words. Trauma is stated as an intensely painful encounter. This can be very hurtful that the person might not be capable of cases the victim may. Even forget about the event. Normal discursive language cannot be used effectively to discuss trauma. Whereas

imaginative literature can be used for the same. Joshua Pederson analyses the assertions made by Caruth, that the victim may be unable to describe the traumatic experiences in words if the memories return after the incident. He asserts, "Hence her theory of trauma is a ringing endorsement of the testimonial power of literature" (34). Kristen L. Zalenski in an article postulating Judith Herman's Trauma Theory discusses how Herman discloses "remembrance and mourning" to be second the stage of therapy for trauma. "In this stage, the survivor has regained control over her hyperarousal and will begin to tell her story of trauma and transform the traumatic memory so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (385).

Nemat shares nostalgic remembrance of pre-revolutionary Iran where she lived happily as a child worried about no political restrictions. She juxtaposes images of two women in the street of Iran where one wears a fully covering attire from head to toe while the others wear a mini skirt and a tight T-shirt. It was the time of Shah and women need not dress according to the Islamic rules. Earlier, Marina could read Western novels of her choice from the book store but soon possession of Western novels was taken by the guards as evidence of her activities against the Islamic government. She was arrested and taken to Evin. "Evin had been a political prison since the time of Shah. The name brought fear to every heart: it equaled torture and death. Its many buildings were scattered across a large area north of Tehran at the foot of the Alborz Mountains. People never talked about Evin; it was shrouded with fearful silence" (7). The very thought of the prison evoked deadly fear in the people as they believed that escape from the walls of the prison was nearly impossible. Long hours of torturous and mind-numbing sessions of interrogation under the presence of male prison guards and senior interrogators were the most traumatic of all episodes described in the memoir. Nemat was handcuffed both the hands in a single cuff, dragged to bed and fastened to the metal headboard. The soles of her feet were whipped with a black cable and the interrogators went on counting the lashes as if it was a bet. She had no secrets regarding the revolutionary agencies to tell them but still had to endure violent treatment. "We just needed to know more about you, and you proved to us that you're an enemy of the revolution. You're a danger to Islamic society" (35). Nemat was labelled as an enemy to the revolutionary government.

Nemat was later sent to the women's dorm in Evin 246. Every time when taken out of the interrogation room she was blind folded like all the fellow prisoners. On reaching the room she realized from her roommates that her name was marked on her forehead, which later turned out to be the sign for death sentence, from which she was rescued by Ali. Many of her friends were arrested by the police and Gita was executed for not speaking up the name of other revolutionaries. Nemat recalled how she lost Arash, her first love, as he was involved in revolutionary activities against the Shah. "He explained that he had been supporting the Islamic movement against the Shah to the best of his abilities, and he was well aware that what he was involved with was dangerous. He wrote that he had never been very courageous, but now he felt he had put fear aside, and he understood that he could lose his life for his beliefs" (84). After being brutally lashed, Marina felt that it might be "the line that separated life and death," because it was a near death experience for her. The prison is ignominious for pathetic and inhumane conditions imposed on political prisoners and dissidents since 1979. Survivors of the prison reported systemic torture, severe overcrowding, lack of basic amenities and medical care, sexual and psychological abuse and much more. Food was limited and the tea was mixed with camphor everyday as it is believed that camphor stopped female prisoners from menstruating. This is done in prison because sanitary pads were expensive. Most females in the prison didn't get their periods at all and those came with side effects including swelling of the body and depression.

Rape was a form of torture against females in Evin prisons. A couple of girls in the prison told Nemat that they were raped and threatened by the guards that if they informed anyone

about it, they would be executed. Taraneh said that she had once heard that before executing girls, guards raped them, because they believed virgins went to heaven when they died. One of the prisoners named Sheida, twenty years old, was pregnant, but her execution had been postponed because it was against the laws of Islam to execute a pregnant or breastfeeding woman. Nemat exposes how one of the fellow prisoners named Sarah attempts to commit suicide. The intense emotional and physical suffering along with a pervasive feeling of hopelessness has led to this incident. However, this event snatched away the last bit of hope that was left in her. "It was spring, and the air was light and carried the fragrance of blossoms. Life was going on outside the walls of Evin" (118). Fear increased day by day as executions became frequent in Evin. Ali appeared to be a savior for Nemat as he rescued her from being executed and cancelled her death sentence by using his influence with Ayatollah Khomeini. She still faced trial and continued to be in Evin. Nemat was interrogated by two guards in Evin prison named Hamehd and Ali. Hamehd used every opportunity he got to torture Nemat but Ali was sympathetic towards her. It is later revealed that Ali was influenced by her fearless nature and physical charms and was interested to marry her. In return, he asked her to marry him after converting to Islam leaving behind her faith in Christianity. He threatens to execute her lover Andre and arrest her parents when she initially refuses.

To save her parents and Andre, Nemat had to marry Ali and convert to Islam. Even though Ali loved her and assures her that it was not a temporary marriage or a passing physical attraction and also was very considerate towards her by arranging for all basic needs and requirements, Nemat had no love for Ali because the marriage was not done out of affection but to save her parents and her lover, with no other choice left. She was forced to spend her time in prison as the secret bride to Ali, for satiating his physical desires, and had to keep it a secret from her prison mates. It was not less than a rape as she was forced each time to be with him. Ali never felt that it was a mistake on his part to never ask for Marina's consent or take her resistance towards the act seriously. He wanted Marina to get used to it. For Marina it was nothing but rape. The concept of marital rape is not legally recognized as a crime under Iranian law. The law considers all sexual relations within marriage as consensual.

... He came toward me. I took a few steps back and bumped into a cabinet. Even if Iran, I couldn't go for. He grabbed my arms, and his fingers dug into my flesh

"You're hurting me," I said.

"Am I hurting You?"

"Yes. You've been hurting me since I first saw you. And you've been hurting other people, and you're been hurting yourself" (196).

Vibha Yadav asserts that, "more than hundred countries across the world have made marital rape, an offence against the fairer sex" (137). She further adds the reality of how marriage is viewed as a license for sexual intercourse by men. "... As per this theory, a woman "belongs" to her father before marriage, and is her husband's property thereafter. Since the owner of the property is empowered to use his property to his own needs, the question of a husband raping his wife does not arise" (139).

Shadi Sadr and Shadi Amin report the reality of sexual abuses in the prisons of Iran based on testimonials of victims, survivors, witnesses and experts. It also analyses the parallel processes of authority and the heinous way in which Iranian security officials raped and tortured female prisoners those were about to face execution or forced prisoners into marriage as a barter for their life. Prison marriage between prison interrogators or prison officials and female prisoners were common during the 1980's. In such cases, the consent of the woman prisoner is gained under threat, enforcement or harassment. "Hence these prison marriages must be treated as

forced marriage. Any sexual relation that stemmed from such a marriage should be considered as rape" (95). One of the most brutal practices of all were the rape of young virgin girls. Young girls were raped by the guards the night before their execution. They use the religious term "siqih" to justify this act. It is believed that young virgin girls attain paradise after death. "Siqih"- the temporary marriage and rape was to take away their virginity. These actions and practices are fanatical and assures the male prison guards that the female prisoners would never cross their limits and would never take part in any anti-revolutionary practices in the future.

The marriage of Ali and Nemat was short lived. Ali was shot to death by his enemies, Nemat was left injured in the accident. She was eight weeks pregnant then and lost the baby after the incident. Her life once again took a drastic change. Nemat felt, "Now, there was another life that was affected: an innocent child" (222). Hopes appeared again after Ali's death. The Will left by Ali a few days before his death reveals the goodness in him. Ali left everything he had to be inherited by Nemat. He wanted his father Mr. Moosavi to help Nemat to return to her parents if he ever died in an accident. Nemat was released after many trials and pleas and Ali's family helped her in every stage. She returned to her parents and finally got reunited with her lover Andre. They got married a year later. "I realized that although my time in Evin felt like a lifetime, it had only been two years, two months, and twelve days" (243).

The Iran-Iraq war still continued to affect the life of Iranian people after the revolution. Nemat and Andre made efforts to escape the country but Nemat's passport was denied in Evin. Andre got a teaching job at the university in Zahedan and both became parents to a boy child. Even after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini the reign of terror continued under the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Finally, after many struggles Nemat was issued a passport and was permitted to leave the country on-paying 500,000 tomans; about 3,500 American dollars, as a deposit to guarantee her return. She migrated to Canada. Nemat shares the story of Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian, who died in Evin on July 11 2003. She was arrested in June during a student-led protest in Iran and was soon reported to be in a coma. Later her death was reported and due to external pressure, an internal investigation was made. Even though Canadian foreign affairs officials and Kazimi's son demanded the return of her body to Canada, she was buried in Iran. On March 31, 2005, the horrific details regarding Kazimi's death were made public by Dr. Shahram Azam. It appeared that Zahra was brutally raped, scratched and bruised, had two broken fingers, a broken nose, three broken and missing finger nails, a skull fracture, a crushed left toe, and flogged feet. Marina happened to read Zahra's story in the newspaper and decided to finally speak up the truth about Evin by not letting her fear hold her captive any longer.

Zahra's story was known to the world just because she was a Canadian. Hundreds of thousands of Iranian women prisoners suffer in Evin and they are nobody to this world. Marina, gaining inspiration from Zahra, decides to speak up for the rest of the prisoners. Terry A. Kupers discusses how the equation of rape and gender works in prison. "Rape is not about sex; it is about power and domination. I can't claim that insight, which many have had. But it's true in prison, and in society as a whole. Men use their superior strength to objectify, abuse and dominate women. And in prison, those with power, on average, use their power to abuse those with less power" (433). The brutality encountered by political prisoners in Iran has no limits. Female prisoners in detention facilities like Evin have shown sustained resistance against the autocratic regime's oppressive actions and brutality. Political protests, hunger strikes, public defiance are all examples of their resistive actions. The very recent "Women, Life, Freedom" movements were also examples of Iranian women's persistent struggles through which they question the mandatory Hijab laws, executions and gender-based violence. Their courage persists despite receiving brutality and injustice including torture, rape, beating and death sentences. Even though the narratives of the political detainees explain the complexities between the prison administrative

system and the female prisoners, the autocratic rule of the religious masters have altered and disrupted the normal living conditions of women living in these countries. The memoirs of prisoners, both men and women, exposes the systemic injustices and brutality of life under authoritarian rule, raising questions about morality, complicity and survival in oppressive environments.

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