

From Egypt to America: Manipulating the Prison Experience in Women's Prison Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the manipulation of the prison experience in Farida Al-Naqqash's *Al-Sijn: al-Watan (Prison: Homeland)* (1983) and Cyntoia Brown-Long's *Free Cyntoia: My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System* (2019). The study explores how both authors transform personal incarceration into narratives that expose the mechanisms of power. Central to this inquiry is how Al-Naqqash and Brown-Long manipulate depictions of imprisonment to critique the socio-political systems that sustain state control. Set against the backdrop of authoritarian Egypt and the racialized American penal system, these narratives reveal prisons as disciplinary sites designed to normalize and regulate the individual. Drawing on Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), these analyses demonstrate how carceral mechanisms produce "docile bodies". By utilizing the prison as a metaphor for Egypt, Al-Naqqash connects political imprisonment to the repressive patriarchal structures, illustrating how gendered power silences voices while simultaneously inspiring resilience. Conversely, Brown-Long explores how the intersection of race, class and gender restricts marginalized women within the United States. Ultimately, both authors frame their narratives as acts of resistance; while Al-Naqqash tackles Middle Eastern patriarchy and political repression, Brown-Long challenges systemic racism and gendered repression within a democratic framework. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of comparative prison literature by highlighting how divergent political context utilizes similar narrative strategies to defy power system.

Keywords: Prison Literature, Foucault, Power, Farida Al-Naqqash, Cyntoia Brown-Long.

1. Introduction

Prison literature represents a transformative act through which individuals express resilience and resistance against oppressive conditions by recounting their experiences of confinement. Documentation in the form of novels, memoirs, poetry, and letters allows incarcerated individuals to reveal their prison experience. Many scholars have attempted to

conceptualize prison literature as a distinct literary genre. In one of the early critical discussions of the genre, H. Bruce Franklin (1989), described it as “literature produced by members of the oppressed classes who have become artists with words through their experience by being defined by the state as criminals” (p. 30). Franklin characterizes prison writings with the themes of class, power, and control, revealing how repression can lead to creative expression. Subsequent scholars further developed the concept of this genre, as Ruth Ahnert (2013) states, “imprisonment provides freedom, and constraint leads to productivity” (p. 1). Ahnert draws attention to the fact that human creativity often develops within the confined spaces. Taking this idea further, Simon Rolston (2021) adds, “incarcerated individuals are deprived of their liberty, find freedom in writing about their lives” (p. 123) adding that these narratives provide prisoners with a measure of agency in a system, which aims to control and define them. Similarly, Magray et al. (2022) describe prison literature as “the body of fictional and non-fictional literature created by imprisoned writers and thinkers behind the bars” (p. 93). Accordingly, these definitions emphasize how prison literature, across its different forms of writing, enables incarcerated individuals to recount experiences of confinement, describe prison conditions, and express their resilience and resist oppression. From this perspective, prison literature becomes a mode of testimony that enables incarcerated individuals to preserve a sense of self while confronting oppressive systems of power.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Power, Discipline, and the Architecture of Control

This study relies on Michel Foucault's (1975) theoretical understanding of power as introduced in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which remains essential for understanding how power functions, controls, and shapes obedient individuals. As he argues, disciplinary power:

"Is practiced by its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault, 1975, p. 187).

According to him, modern institutions maintain control by making the power of the gaze invisible while keeping individuals visible at all times. Within this structure, individuals behave as if they are always being surveilled, even when there is no one actually watching them. This continuous surveillance is what maintains obedience, as individuals internalize the authoritative gaze and begin to monitor their own behavior. Clearly, this system reveals how discipline works less through force than through the pressure of being watched. Foucault uses the Panopticon as a metaphor for modern disciplinary societies, where power functions by making individuals believe that they are under continuous surveillance, forcing them to internalize the gaze and regulate their own behavior. According to Foucault's (1975) analysis of the functioning of the Panopticon, it "assures and induces in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility" (p. 201). Accordingly, this architectural design is no longer based on punishment; rather, it functions through the internalization of power, as imprisoned individuals begin to regulate their own behavior out of fear and awareness of invisible surveillance. In this way, imprisoned individuals become participants in their own subjection, a process that develops into self-discipline aligned with institutional expectations. Within such a structure, discipline transforms the individual, producing what Foucault refers to as "docile bodies" that "may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault, 1975, p. 136). Moreover, Foucault explains that the prison "resembles factories, schools, barracks, hospitals" (Foucault, 1975, p. 228). Foucault's perspective presents the prison as a microcosm of a larger institutional system in which mechanisms of power shape

and control individuals. Thus, the prison functions as both a physical and ideological symbol that illustrates how power operates within society. Moreover, the concept of power frames Foucault's analytical framework, particularly in his examination of modern institutions and their systems of control. Foucault argues that power is not merely restrictive or repressive but a productive force within social systems. As he argues:

"We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it excludes, represses, censors, abstracts, masks, and conceals. In fact, power produces reality; it produces the domain of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1975, p. 194).

The statement above represents an important transformation from typical legal and social systems that conceptualize power primarily in negative terms. According to Foucault, power functions most effectively by producing norms, discourses, and behavioral patterns that shape everyday life. Moreover, Foucault (1978) defines power as a network of "force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (p. 92). Foucault emphasizes that power is constructed within every aspect of social relationships; it shapes the contexts in which individuals and institutions function. Within the prison context, this Foucauldian perspective reveals the institution as far more than merely a mechanism of punishment. Rather, the prison functions as a space where power reshapes individuals' identities, influencing their self-understanding, their surroundings, and their position within the institutional power system. This paper applies Foucault's theory to examine how power is represented in the narratives under discussion.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a comparative and an analytical methodology focusing on female prison literature. It aims to explore the representations of prison by female writers through Foucault's concept of power. I argue that the mechanisms of power transform the individual's identity, regulate their bodies and behaviors. This paper conducts an in-depth reading of Al-Naqqash's (1983) narrative *Al Sijn al-Watan (Prison-Homeland)* and Brown-Long's (2019) autobiographical account *Free Cyntoia: My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System*. This paper aims to give a better understanding of how female writers manipulate the prison experience to reveal the effects of power on the individual. The selected texts, I argue, introduce the prison not just as a place of punishment, but also as a microcosm of society that practices power.

3. Literature Review

One of the main characteristics of prison literature is that it is inspired by the lived experience of authors, whether written inside the prison or later as a memoir, thus embodying their struggle against injustice and oppression. This probably explains why this body of literature is widely read and viewed as inevitable to reveal the truth behind authors' real-life experiences. For instance, Al-Naqqash's novel (1983) has received academic interest from different perspectives. Marilyn Booth (1987), in her paper, *Women Prison Memoirs, in Egypt and Elsewhere: Prison, Gender, Praxis*, she contends that, "memoirs of political prisoners, in any society, significantly contribute to the individuals' struggle and group opposition to achieve essential human rights: freedom of expression and movement, privacy, health, humane treatment and above all, the right to a voice in the organization of one's society" (Booth, 1987, p. 35). Booth describes the main outline of prison writing aspects, emphasizing how individuals struggle for their freedom, basic

human rights and resist the challenges. A similar argument appears in Samia Kholoussi's (2019) article, *Arab Women's Autobiography a Contentious Practice that Elicits Disapprobation, Jeering, Curiosity, and/or Furor*, where she notes that "some autobiographies focus on documenting the experiences of incarceration of the authors suffered for their dissident stand" (Kholoussi, 2019, p. 38). Her comments situate the narrative of Al-Naqqash in a larger set of autobiographical narratives of incarceration by Arab women, in which incarceration used as a means of expression and recording of suffering and, thus, connects the writing process to resistance and survival in response to oppressive socio-political contexts.

Moreover, Booth (1987) makes a significant contribution to the issues that women experience in a political prison and claims that:

Female political prisoner finds herself fighting not only the isolation and self-doubt which any political prisoner potentially faces, but also fighting the identity, the duties and the spheres which society has shaped her, and of which—in prison—she is constantly reminded (Booth, 1987, p. 35).

The quote by Booth focuses on the idea that even a woman in prison cannot avoid the isolation and the lack of knowledge of being in a prison, but also the social structure that defines her and her role. Through this, imprisonment is a place of convergence between patriarchal and political forces that compel women to confront and alter their sense of self in spaces that remind them of their marginalization.

Similarly, Alaa Abu Naji (2020) in her paper *What Are They Jailed for? Unromantic Depictions of Womens Criminal Resistance in Egypt*, the study is about women narratives, which manifests the structural injustices which compel women to criminalization. Abu Naji explains that:

The aim of these writers goes beyond depicting the conditions of the prison, and the special treatment afforded to women within. One can say that the Egyptian criminal justice system mirrors the patriarchal structural of the larger social system. For these authors, prison function as a metaphor for the realities of the social structure (Abu Naji, 2020, p. 10).

Her argument emphasizes that incarceration is a national reflection of the nationwide situation that was created by an oppressive system. The symbolic similarities between the prison and the homeland sets Al-Naqqash's narrative within a political and feminist discourse that rejects both prison and system repression. Her narrative engages with feminist discourse by foregrounding women's experiences of imprisonment and resistance within oppressive political structures. Rather than portraying women solely as victims of patriarchal violence, she presents them as individuals who actively confront repression and participate in political struggle. Through her account of imprisonment, she also illustrates how Arab women, including herself and her prisoners, attempted to preserve and redefine their sense of identity during periods of incarceration and political unrest.

Nevertheless, studies on *Free Cyntoia My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System* (2019), has focused on gender and structural injustices that are embedded in the American prison system. In her article, *Sorry You Cannot Be a Victim in a Black Body*, Eniyah Brown Moore (2021) claims that Brown-Long's narrative deals with "structural intersectionality" (Brown-Moore, 2021, p. 5), she argues that ethnicity, sex, and class transform the protagonist's ordeal of her imprisonment. Moreover, she believes that these narrative function as a "platform for raising awareness about the inequalities encountered by Black women" (Brown-Moore, 2021, p. 5), placing Brown-Long's narrative as a literary and activist contribution on reforming the legal

system. Similarly, Rawabi Hamid (2020), in her article titled *The Black Womans Burden a Discussion of Race, Rape Culture, and Feminism*, deals with the marginalization of Black women. She claims that of Brown-Long the experience can be an example of how women of colour are treated by the justice system, and says that:

The issue created through the stereotypes of over-sexualization, and sub-humanity attributed to Black women furthers this broad hesitation in believing women of color who share their experience abuse. These women are often ignored by the justice system and never attain justice for the crimes against them. Black women are often punished for sharing their narratives (Hamid, 2020, p. 138).

Hamid (2020) argues that Cyntoia's was criminalized due the act of her self-defense, and this is an illustration of how behaviors by Black women in self-defense is often misinterpreted as criminal acts.

Cook et al. (2022), in their paper argue that long's "first conviction and the legal proceeding that followed reveals how the macro-level power and institutions (in this case, the justice system) contribute to and maintain racial inequities and are a significant determinant of outcomes for DMST survivors" (Cook et al., 2022, p. 11). Their main point emphasizes how Brown-Long's narrative cannot be understood without looking at how the structural and institutional racism affects the lives of the marginalized women within the justice system. Based on these arguments, *Free Cyntoia: My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System* (2019) goes beyond just a personal memoir; it is a socio-political documentation, which reveals how the prison system is a form of racialized and gendered power.

To the best of current scholarly knowledge, no prior research has examined Farida Al-Naqqash's narrative *Al-Sijn al-Watan (Prison-Homeland)* (1983) and Cyntoia Brown-Long's narrative *Free Cyntoia: My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System* (2019) within the context of prison literature. The two narratives examined from different perspectives; however, the depiction of the prison as a literary and disciplinary space remain undiscussed. In addition, there remains a noticeable gap in comparative scholarship, which examines these texts through a Foucauldian perspective. This study therefore aims to fill this critical gap by placing both narratives within the theoretical context of power, allowing researchers from different fields a better understanding of how prison literature functions across different cultural, political, and historical contexts.

Depicting the Prison in Al-Naqqash's and Brown-Long's Narratives

In Farida Al-Naqqash's (1983) narrative, the prison functions as a powerful symbol for the Egyptian state under Sadat rule, revealing the close relationship between political repression and everyday social life. Al-Naqqash suggests that the boundary separating prisoners from so-called "free" citizens is minimal, stating that prison "is besieging the homeland" and that the distinction between the two worlds is "very small" (Al-Naqqash, 1983, p. 86). This collapse between prison and society reflects Foucault's (1975) argument that the prison is "not qualitatively different" from other disciplined institutions like schools or workshops (p. 200). By depicting Egypt as an extension of the prison system, Al-Naqqash presents the state as a pervasive structure of disciplinary power. Beyond its symbolic dimensions, Farida Al-Naqqash depicts the degrading material conditions of imprisonment through references to the "heat, the bugs, the cockroaches and the soldiers' spit" (Al-Naqqash, 1983, p. 38), illustrating how disciplinary power targets the prisoner's dignity and bodily existence. These sensory details reflect what Michel Foucault (1975)

describes as the production of “docile bodies.” Yet, Al-Naqqash simultaneously presents forms of resistance that challenge this process, by invoking motherhood stating she is “psychologically prepared” (Al-Naqqash, 1983, p. 38), she preserves a sense of agency within a patriarchal state that seeks to suppress both political dissent and female autonomy. In this way, her narrative asserts and identity that resists erasure despite the oppressive conditions of confinement.

Similarly, Cyntoia Brown-Long’s (2019) narrative demonstrates how carceral power extends beyond the physical boundaries of the prison. Brown-Long compares her imprisonment to being “stuck in a Chinese finger trap” (Brown-Long, 2019, p. 96), suggesting that confinement operates not only through locked cells and surveillance but also through social control and patriarchal domination. Her description of restrictive rules and male authority over her body reveals how institutional and gendered forms of power shape the prison experience. Through this portrayal, Brown-Long presents imprisonment as an ongoing condition reinforced by both disciplinary structures and broader social inequalities. This pervasive form of control reflects Michel Foucault’s (1975) concept of the Panopticon, which creates a “state of conscious and permanent visibility” (p. 201), thereby allowing power to function automatically. In Brown-Long’s narrative, this surveillance appears through the Cyntoia’s internal struggle to regulate herself under continues institutional authority. Ultimately, both narratives suggest that the prison extends beyond a physical structure, operating instead as a broader mechanism of disciplinary power that attempts to regulate the identity and freedom of marginalized individuals.

Reimagining the Experience of Imprisonment in Al-Naqqash and Brown-Long’s Narratives

In *Al-Sijn al-Watan (Prison-Homeland)* (1983), Farida Al-Naqqash depicts the prison as a symbol of repression and resilience. As she states:

There is nothing to fear... ‘Prison is a wall’... the door sealed with heat, moisture, bugs, and cockroaches, despite its insolence and the magical eye of informers and the detective officer of the Castle prison (Sijn Al-Qal’a). Overall, it is a moral dam that the fighter can always cross and even break through not by the force of his thoughts alone but by the solidity of his soul with that simple spiritual yoga (Al-Naqqash, 1983, pp. 12–13).

Farida’s statement describes the oppressive environment of the prison and transforms it from a space of punishment into one of resistance and resilience. Furthermore, the “magical eye of informers” reveals how the incarcerated individuals subjected to the mechanisms of power. However, her statement emphasizes resistance and resilience under the effects of this mechanism. Her statement aligns with Foucault’s (1975) theorization of surveillance that maintains power. As Foucault states, “surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration: reports from the syndics to the intendants, from the intendants to the magistrates or mayor” (Foucault, 1975, p. 196). This hierarchical system of surveillance makes sure that the prisoners are always visible. However, Farida demonstrates her resistance to the mechanisms of power through her resilience. Furthermore, Farida describes the prison as a “moral dam,” which suggests that the institution aims to oppress and discipline. However, the prison transformed as a space where the prisoners build their resilience and self-awareness. According to this context, imprisonment functions as a space of punishment and resistance. The practice of “spiritual yoga” presents the act of being calm and self-control, representing resistance and resilience against the prison’s difficult conditions. Through this depiction, Farida shows her ability to maintain this resilience under such conditions and acts as a hidden form of resistance against the power system.

In Brown-Long's (2019) narrative, Cyntoia describes the lived experience of imprisonment, revealing how the prison controls individuals. She states:

Something about being trapped that exaggerates the emotions and issues already inside you. The numb, autopilot state I'd been in for weeks melted away, now I felt everything anger when guards shackled my hands and feet like I was some kind of dangerous weapon... frustration at the guards who seemed to enjoy telling me when I could shower, eat, or call my mom. I felt like a wild animal trapped in a circus cage, and I would do anything to get out (Brown-Long, 2019, p. 96).

Cyntoia's representation of being "trapped" reveals the impact of incarceration that imposed on individuals. The way her hands and feet are tied shows how the prisoner turned into something that can be controlled and repressed. In addition, the repression of the basic routine and daily activities by the guards is an example of how the prison controls time, movement and freedom. Cyntoia compares herself to a wild animal in a circus cage, therefore, showing how confinement transforms the people into dehumanized subjects. Overall, her statement describes the power mechanisms that take away the freedom of prisoners, situating the prison as a space of punishment and as a space structured by total power. Cyntoia redefines the prison setting as a symbolic space where power affects every aspect of daily life. She emphasizes how power functions through the prison walls and through subjecting and transforming the prisoner into an object within the system of power. This aligns with Foucault's (1975) claim that "the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, and excludes. In short, it normalizes" (Foucault, 1975, p. 183). Foucault's point is that institutions such as prisons function through continuous monitoring on individuals to maintain obedience. This process signifies how power functions by shaping the behavior and producing obedient and regulated individuals.

Thus, Cyntoia's narrative does not only document her suffering, but it reveals how prison normalizes and shapes individuals. Her image of "a wild animal trapped in a circus cage" shows how imprisonment can make individuals less humans. Therefore, Cyntoia's statement reveals the effects of imprisonment, where being deprived of freedom raises self-understanding and subjection to power.

4. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that both Al-Naqqash (1983) and Brown-Long (2019) reconceptualize the prison as a system of power, not just a space of confinement. Through a Foucauldian perspective, the analysis reveals how carceral power mechanisms in Egypt and the United States regulate individuals and reshape identity. In Al-Naqqash's narrative, the prison operates as a microcosm of the authoritarian state, while Brown-Long illustrates how the American penal system employs surveillance and institutional control to transform inmates into "docile bodies" within a racialized and gendered framework. Despite their divergent sociopolitical contexts, one defined by political dissidence and the other by systemic inequality, both narratives expose the prison power as a universal tool of marginalization. This comparative analysis contributes to prison studies by bridging Middle Eastern and Western prison narratives, suggesting that women's prison literature offers a distinctive critique of power that often remains unaddressed in male-authored accounts. At the same time, the study suggests several possible directions for future research. Comparative engagement with male-authored prison narratives, such as Mustafa Khalifa's narrative *The Shell* (2001), may further illuminate how gender shapes representations of

discipline, suffering, and resistance with carceral spaces. Likewise, feminist critiques of Michel Foucault ideas, particularly those advanced by Sandra Bartky, could offer additional insight into how disciplinary power operates differently upon female bodies and identities across prison narratives.

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