

Thirteen Years: A Story of “Revolutionary Romanticism” and “Torturous Exercise of Poetry”

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Abstract

R. Singh's *Thirteen Years* is a diary-memoir giving expression to his experiences to life and struggle inside and outside prisons. The narration, however, is not confined only to political ideologies and the dark, grim world behind the bar. The elements of humour and pathos are present here in a well-balanced way; and within this framework the cause of solidarity for survival required for challenging the then existing structures of domination has been projected while contributing to the shaping of people's collective consciousness. The effectiveness of the text as a political intervention relies largely on Singh's skill as a storyteller.

Keywords: trauma literature, *testimonio*, witness narrative, prison writing, camaraderie

“Paper and Pencils are as subversive in the hands of political detainees as weapons, guns, and knives might be ...”

Barbara Harlowe

The experience of incarceration in five different prisons in Uttar Pradesh has been narrated by R. Singh in *Thirteen Years* which has been translated into English by M. Singh. R. Singh was involved in armed agrarian struggle encompassing the area from Unnao to the border of Nepal. In his narrative readers find discussions on many important events that influenced the life in the region in the seventies with a touch of simplicity and truthfulness. Pictures of the darkness of society and of prisons especially the period from 1970 to 1983 have been depicted in the diary-memoir with an experience of trauma and of survival from it. The narrative begins:

The rivulets of blood that trickled down my face were dry and strands of hair were plastered untidily across my bloodied forehead. How I fancied my hair once and how carefully I had kept myself groomed. The open gash that cut from the right eye across to the jaw was so grotesque that if I were a child I would have been scared to see it. or I may have clapped and squealed with delight because I now resemble the man who played Hanuman during the

Ramlila in our qasbah. So many memories of childhood flashed before my dazed, half-conscious mind and vanished. (Singh 13)

Singh has provided the description of his intellectual development when he was inside the jails, and his eventual literary activities there. Even before his imprisonment he “formed some tactical understanding of revolutionary politics, but one marked by the revolutionary romanticism of a youth” (57). He lets the reader know of the event of singing the “Internationale”, the song composed in the year 1871 by the French poet Eugene Pottier after the defeat of Paris Commune, and how it inspires the people belong to proletariat class:

Stand up, damned of the earth
stand up, prisoners of starvation
reason thunders in its volcano
this is the eruption of the end... (Singh 35-36)

The narrator recalls the date 14 April 1972, the day of his judgement. The prisoners woke up early in the morning and chanted their prayer song as usual:

Rise, you who sleep, it is dawn now
Your country beckons you.

Rise, the night of darkness departs
The sun colours the sky molten gold
Come, let us banish the darkness of ignorance
Rise, for it is no time to sleep.

Why laze in the darkness of ignorance?
Rise, you who sleep, it is dawn now.

O Youth of the Nation!
Rise, awake, thou sons of the nation
You, the hope of the future, awake
You, the sons of martyrs, awake.

See, the darkness of stupor has departed
Rise, you who sleep, it is dawn now. (47-48)

Singh reveals his ruminations on the truth behind the misery faced by human beings in different societies through different periods of history. He raises the question: “From ancient times to the present why didn’t the so-called enlightened souls – the saints, and the seers, the prophets and philosophers, scholars and thinkers – formulate practical rules for our social system not to leave space for such endless misery and sorrow?” (31-32). He experienced life and society, and realised the presence of a bitter discrimination. He raises his voice for another prisoner Jaswant:

Was Jaswant solely responsible for looting or was it the result of youth's helpless addiction to a fast – living culture, needing big hauls of immediate cash, legal or illegal, to fulfil their desires and compensate for unfulfilled ones. The capitalist society and its class hierarchy ensure that lower and middle class youths are for that illusive joy of life in hotels, clubs, violence and adventure. (30)

Singh's dissatisfaction for the behaviour of some of the prisoners has also been reflected:

They joked, yelled, cursed, banged on their plates and sang boisterously. Undoubtedly, some of them were good singers. But at the slightest provocation they would mouth such obscenities as were simply unimaginable outside. This was perhaps their way of defying society, as they gleefully challenged and demolished the bounds of societal norms, morality and restraint. In its sting, lethality and brazenness, the prison lexicon is thing apart from the ordinary run of bad language. (Singh 22-23)

The narrative although focussing on prison experiences with a backdrop of the intellectual development of the speaker in the Marxist line, is not without the elements of humour. Singh recalls the period in early 1971 when the prisoners decided that each and every leftist captive would read out poems in front of all others inside the jail. Although many of them tried their best to do so, and some became "poets perforce" (36), it was a very difficult job to one of the detainees. He, although almost unlettered but deeply committed to his political ideologies, used to be forced by other captives to compose verse sitting in prison. When his turn came, Kishan-ji who looked "tormented and pathetic" (36) tried to escape. Eventually, however, he could manage to get rid of that "torturous exercise of poetry" (36) after entertaining other convicts with his funny gestures that he had learnt during his experience in a circus company in South India.

The bitter events and the hard realities of life inside the jails could not snatch away the jovial spirit inside the protagonist who, after getting tortured by an old, cruel warden, called up the love and affection from his grandparents during his childhood and narrates an anecdote:

I remembered a story I had heard in my childhood. A king had two wives. He neglected the elder queen in his love for the younger one. After grabbing all his wealth, the younger queen forced the king to banish the elder queen to the forest to chase crows. Time passed, people now insulted and poked fun at her. After a while the crow-chaser queen became ugly. Happiness had disappeared from her life and she continued to chase crows like a crazy woman. As love tenderness and charm left her, she became bitter, quarrelsome and cruel. The plight of our old warden was quite like hers. (Singh 18)

The event of Manjhiya village where the speaker met Mausī and her daughter constitute an interesting sub-plot in the narration which is declared as "Prison Diary". When the narrator reached there with his friend, Mausī expressed her happiness and surprise, and

informed him that she had been waiting for him for a long time. Singh noticed a faint touch of reproach in her voice and at the same time a little smile on her countenance. He and his friend felt fresh after splashing water on their faces. While her son and younger daughter were observing him very carefully with great curiosity and interest, Singh enjoyed the affection of their mother and deliberated on the possibility of any “karmic” relationship between himself and the Mausi in their previous lives. He, however, did not fail to notice Ramdulari (Munni), a sweet young girl in her early teens, who watched them “from the corner of her eye, lowered her head and then shyly went into the next room.” Her “innocent”, “relaxed”, and “informal” eyes met those of Singh several times when she was serving food. He liked the affectionate behaviour of her mother who insisted “You’ll have to visit us frequently as I can no longer look after the farming” (p. 43).

Mausi’s efforts to bring Singh and Ramdulari together proved ironical when during incarceration of Singh, Mausi started visiting Singh alone and never brought Ramdulari with her. The situation went up to that extent when Mausi began her searching for another boy as Ramdulari’s would be husband. Mausi could be restrained from her effort of looking for a boy for her daughter only by Ramdulari who threatened her to commit suicide. Ramdulari left her place, reached the village of Singh and luckily met Singh’s father at the whole market for jaggery. With Singh’s father she went to meet him outside the Barrack Number VIII of Unnao District Jail and then left in Kanpur with the mother and the grandmother of Singh.

Many of my party comrades criticised me behind my back. But I did not bother. I had great respect and love for them but did not subscribe to their view that as a revolutionary one should avoid women because their presence came in the way of revolution. I believed that if adopting a dull and rigid attitude towards life made one a communist revolutionary, then perhaps I could never become one. Commitment towards a cause can happen only when the heart and the mind are set free. In the dark and difficult time ahead, it was love that made me realise the beauty and simplicity of life, and filled me with total commitment to the cause without distracting me. Bhagat Singh had once said: “As far as love is concerned, I can say that this is only an impulse and nothing else, but this is definitely not beastliness. It never degrades human beings, but this is possible only when love is actually true love. (Singh 46)

The subplot concerning Ramdulari brings into a mixture of pathos and humour in Singh’s Prison narrative. Her presence in Unnao District Jail for the purpose of meeting Singh, initially, used to make him thoughtful and often sad considering her future. He advised her not to bind her life to his uncertain days to come. Ramdulari in a soft but firm voice replied, “Did you leave me that day to say all this?” She was dressed well on the next day of her visit and used vermilion in the parting of her hair. Considering his own dress, the uniform for the prisoners, Singh pondered over his own misfortune. The memory of the previous days, the present and the apprehension of the coming days all confused him. The thought of accepting Ramdulari as his wife, caused a conflict inside him. At the same time his friends made fun of his relationship with the girl. According to them, to be anxious of a girl was not a sign of a real revolutionary. Singh felt perplexed considering that:

If being a revolutionary meant being insensitive to inner consciousness, feelings and sympathies, if it is an externally imposed state of mind, then truly I wasn't one. I loved Munni with all my heart and soul and wanted a life for her that was free from my uncertain future. But I could see that there were no signs of anxiety, fear or doubt about the future in her. Her firm determination gradually persuaded me to accept as her my wife. (Singh 68)

Singh tried to refine the taste of the rural girl and motivate her to read books like Maxim Gorky's *Mother* where she found the life and struggle of a hard-working woman factory-worker and experiences of moving forward with hunger and poverty. However, soon his friends inside as well as outside the prison accepted her warmly as his wife, they showed her due respect and provided necessary supports. She became much confident and was ready for a political life and to face even death for a cause. She was praised in the revolutionary communist circle. Singh describes her love as the pillar of strength in his life. "Her tinkling laughter echoed in the barrack as if challenging the red brick walls – equally those of their dogma and of the state." (69)

Considering Singh's text an example of the genre of *testimonio* instead of an autobiography opens up additional dimensions of the narrative and at the same time it enriches the genre also.

What exactly is a *testimonio*? The general form of the *testimonio* is a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode (e.g., the experience of being a prisoner). Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist. (Beverley and Zimmerman 173)

Reading *testimonios* enables readers to interpose themselves in a relation of solidarity with social reform and liberation movements. Prison-writings such as Singh's fashion a discourse of testimony. It re-inscribes its context in the narrative that helps others to make sense of the particular predicaments of the speaker and his friends. Moreover, it lets the readers better appreciate the motivation for involvement in their activities in a traditional patriarchal, caste-based culture. It can be seen as an important extension of Singh's political activities. For Singh the *testimonio* is a way to document events or experiences of subalternity, exploitation, repression and poverty.

References:

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